

# **A Girl Named Willow Krimble**

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# Chapter One

## Cafeteria Showdown



Willow Krimble could not remember the last time she was so nervous. Her heart was racing at, what seemed to be, a thousand beats per minute. Beads of sweat rolled down her freckled forehead, as most of the cafeteria looked on in anticipation at, what they hoped would be, the first fight of the school year.

“It was an accident,” muttered Willow. “It just slipped out of my hand.”

“I just had my hair done yesterday and ... well, look at it!” Shayla Stergus shouted. “Not that I’d expect *you* to understand, with that shaggy mop on your head!”

Davis Sweany took hold of his girlfriend’s arm and gently tugged her one step back towards him.

“Calm down, Shayla. I’m sure she didn’t do it on purpose.”

“So what! She’s still a moron! I’m not gonna give her special treatment just because of her ... her —”

“—Stupid handicap!” Snella Burinbine interjected. Snella was Shayla’s closest friend, if you could call what they had a *friendship*. Snella followed Shayla everywhere since the sixth grade. She simply latched onto the girl whom she felt would be the most popular. She was right. Here they were now, in eighth grade, and there was not a girl in Ginkelman Middle School who didn’t want to be Shayla Stergus, or at least as beautiful as her. Most of the girls wished they had Shayla’s long, glistening, jet-black hair and perfect smile — not that she smiled often.

“That’s right!” Shayla continued to shout. “I’m supposed to feel sorry for her because she was born with one leg? Well, you know what...” the crowd of curious students seemed to be growing larger now, at least to Willow who was looking around anxiously, “...maybe I’ll just take that fake leg of hers and shove it—”

“Try it, and you’ll be the only eighth-grader wearing dentures,” Razzel Fiora interrupted, removing her glasses, clenching both fists. Razzel was Willow’s dearest friend since they met in the park when they were both three years old. Razzel was always very protective of Willow. Her feistiness kept most students, who

would ordinarily poke fun of Willow's physical condition, at bay.

"What's all this hullabaloo!" Miss Protts, head of the English Department, barked. "Need I remind you all, the penalty for fighting is instant suspension that goes on your permanent record?"

"There's no problem here, Miss Protts..." replied Davis, "...just a misunderstanding. It's all straightened out now." He began pulling Shayla away, at last, but her eyes never left Willow's while she was being dragged from her nemesis. There was more than anger searing from Shayla's pupils; there seemed to be resentment in her visage.

The fifth-period bell rang out and everyone, now realizing there was not going to be a fight, grabbed their bags and began shuffling out of the cafeteria.

"You know, Will," said Razzel, "maybe next time we're sitting behind that dark-haired Barbie doll, you shouldn't play with your food?"

"Me?" replied Willow. "You're the one who wanted to see how far a hot dog could fly from the rubber-band on my retainer."

“Yeah, but I didn’t think you would actually be gross enough to take it out of your mouth to find out,” replied Razzel with a chuckle. “Ah, that witch deserved it. Ever since we started middle school last year, she’s acted like she owns this place. What about when we—”

“Let’s just get to Music class,” said Willow. “Four more periods and we get to start our weekend.”

“Amen, sister!” Razzel flung her bag over her left shoulder and threw her free arm around her best friend as they began to walk out of the cafeteria, lagging behind the diminishing crowd. “Amen!”

## Chapter Two The Crash Next Door



Unlike most 13-year-olds, Willow always set her alarm to go off at 6:30am on Saturdays. She loved her weekends. No school, no homework and, best of all, no stressful snobs. She had already been awake for 20 minutes when her alarm rang out. She switched it off, sat up in her bed and attached her prosthetic left leg at the knee. She then grabbed a framed photo from her nightstand, kissed it and placed it back in its proper place. Next she grabbed a colorful bracelet, made from tiny painted seashells, off of her nightstand, and placed it around her wrist. It looked old and worn where the paint had begun to peel off certain parts of the shells, but Willow never went anywhere without it.

She made her way to the bathroom. It was always free for her on Saturday mornings. Her older brother, Wyatt, usually slept until at least 10am, claiming the stress and work of high school took its toll on his 15-year-old body.

Willow gazed into the mirror and wasn't too satisfied with what she saw; she hated her long, bushy, almond-colored hair and wished it were straight and blonde; she hated her pale complexion, speckled with freckles and, most of all, she hated having to wear a retainer. At least the braces she had to endure for over two years were gone. That was a start.

After putting on a sweatshirt, blue jeans and her red canvas sneakers, Willow wrapped a kerchief around her head. This was routine for her. If it wasn't a kerchief, it was a hair-band, a ponytail wrapped in a scrunchie, a wool cap, or hair clips. She always hated sticky hair products like gel and mousse and preferred to tame her mane with accessories.

Willow ran down the stairs and into the kitchen to make breakfast for her family. Second only to reading, cooking was Willow's favorite pastime.

After eating her own breakfast and leaving a stack of banana pancakes and maple sausages for her family on the counter, she grabbed her latest book, *The Journey To Brambosa*, and stepped outside into her backyard. She sat on her bench-swing and began on Chapter 7: *The Crystal Path*.

This was her weekend routine before beginning her chores, at least until the weather became too cold, where she would read on her bed. She much preferred to read outside since Wyatt loved to blast the TV every minute he was home.

Willow loved getting lost in the fictional realms of her books. She often daydreamed about what it might be like if *she* was the heroine of a novel. She certainly did not hate her real life. Her mother was a bit over-protective, since Willow and her brother lost their father, but she showed her children a lot of affection. Wyatt always kept very busy with basketball and video games, but was always there for his sister if she needed him. He never worried about her welfare at school; she was in good hands with Razzel, who was a lot tougher than most boys in Wyatt's high school.

After about two hours of reading, Willow could hear voices emanating from her kitchen a few yards away.

"These pancakes are freakin' awesome," Wyatt said to his mother, his mouth full, spitting out bits of pancake.

Mr. and Mrs. Krimble had produced two children who balanced one another: Willow loved to cook, Wyatt

loved to eat, although you would never know it from his slender, athletic build. Mrs. Krimble often joked about Wyatt's eating habits: *"If he ever gives up sports, he'll blow up like a balloon, the way he packs it in."*

Willow pondered going inside to bid her family "good-morning", but she couldn't tear herself away from her book; she just had to finish the chapter she was in the middle of.

Just as her eyes were scanning the final paragraph, Willow heard her neighbor, Carlo Sprunco, and his dog, Luka, making their way out of their back door. Willow loved Luka. He was a three-year-old beagle and the friendliest dog she had ever met. Willow had begged her mother to get a dog, but Mrs. Krimble claimed she was allergic. Willow was never certain if this was true because her mother only seemed to be allergic whenever Willow asked her for a dog. Nevertheless, the answer was always an emphatic, *"No."*

*"Gooda morna, Weelah,"* Carlo Sprunco greeted his young neighbor, waving with one hand, trying to hold his bathrobe closed with the other. He always butchered Willow's name with his heavy Italian accent, but Willow didn't mind.

She closed her book and made her way over to the fence where Luka was waiting to be petted.

“Good morning, Mr. Sprunco,” she said, reaching over the short metal fence to pet Luka, who was now standing on his hind legs, panting with excitement.

“That dog make me crazy with all the howla. You wanna buy? I sell cheap.”

Willow chuckled.

“I wish I could, but you know my mom’s allergic. Maybe someday when I get my own place.”

“Oh, I no waita that long,” replied Mr. Sprunco. “This dog make me crazy now.” He turned around and walked back into his home, leaving Luka to enjoy the affection he was receiving from his favorite neighbor.

“He would never sell you, would he, boy?” said Willow, her tone reminiscent of an adult addressing a one-year-old child.

Luka responded by licking Willow’s hand.

“He would miss your howling if you ever—”

Willow was suddenly interrupted by the sound of shattering glass, immediately followed by a loud thud. Luka instantly ran back inside through the doggy-door.

All Willow could hear was non-stop barking. She paused for a moment and without even thinking, never letting her prosthetic leg slow her down, she instinctively climbed over the steel fence. She began knocking on her neighbor's back door, but there was no answer.

"Mr. Sprunco! Willow called out. "Are you okay?"

No answer.

Willow began to panic. She looked over to her yard and squinted her eyes to try to see through her kitchen window. She could barely make out her mother and brother at the kitchen counter, still enjoying their breakfast. Should she go back and ask them for help? Was she overreacting? Maybe everything was fine. Suddenly, Luka ran back outside through the doggy door and straight through Willow's legs, almost bowling her over. She turned around to look at him as he began to howl.

*Something must be wrong.*

She decided to try the back door. It was unlocked. She entered cautiously as Luka followed behind, howling incessantly.

"Mr. Sprunco ... it's Willow ... everything okay? I heard some noise and —"

Willow broke off as she peered into her neighbor's living room, her eyes meeting a horrific sight. She ran over to the limp body lying on the rug to find Carlo Sprunco clenching his right fist against his chest, unconscious alongside shattered glass from the large vase he toppled over on his way down.

Willow quickly knelt by her neighbor's side. She grabbed his hand, prying it from his chest.

"Mr. Sprunco! Can you hear me?" He didn't answer. Willow was horrorstricken and she couldn't think straight over Luka's relentless whimpers.

"Oh God!" she muttered. She suddenly found herself trying to recall last year's CPR session from gym class. It was only for one day, so she was far from an expert, but she had to try *something*. If she ran to get help, it would just waste time and the one thing she did remember for sure about her CPR class was that time is of the essence. If Mr. Sprunco was not getting oxygen to his brain, it could be fatal in a matter of seconds.

Clasping her neighbor's hand, Willow placed her ear against his mouth. He wasn't breathing. Luka was still howling, but Willow knew she needed to calm down in order to block out any distractions surrounding her.

She suddenly found herself longing for her neighbor's recovery. She wanted to see him next Saturday morning walk outside his back door while she was reading her latest book; wanted to hear him butcher her name once again.

Without wasting another second, Willow released her neighbor's hand and tried her hardest to recall her CPR class. She began muttering to herself, "Okay ... tilt the head back ... pinch both nostrils ... now two quick breathes into the victim's mouth. You can do this ... come on now ... alright ... ready ... here we go..."

With Luka howling, and her heart racing, Willow slowly leaned toward her neighbor's mouth to administer the first two breaths. Seconds away from her lips touching the limp body, Willow received yet another jolt as Mr. Sprunco suddenly began coughing directly into her face.

Willow jerked back as her neighbor continued to cough more rapidly. She watched in amazement as he opened his eyes and began sitting up.

Becoming aware of his surroundings, Carlo Sprunco noticed the shattered glass around him as he leaned

onto his sofa for support. He made it to his feet fairly quickly.

“Ma, che cosa ... cosa è successo?”

Willow did not understand Italian, but it was beginning to sink in that her neighbor was beginning to recover from whatever had deemed him lifeless only moments earlier. She finally snapped out of her confused state and suddenly threw her arms around him.

“Oh, Mr. Sprunco, I was so worried! I heard a loud crash and I didn’t know what to do, so I came in through the back door. Luka was barking like crazy and I figured if I ran to get help, it may be too late and—”

“No worria, Weelah. “ Mr. Sprunco interrupted Willow’s rant. “I okay.” Grabbing Willow by her shoulders, he continued to reassure her. “Looka me ... No probla,” he said now pounding his chest with his right arm. He suddenly looked confused and began rubbing his chest with his right hand.

“Oh no! Are you okay, Mr. Sprunco? Are you having chest pain? Do you need to sit?”

“No, no. I feela good, you know? My chesta no hurt no more. Ma, before, it hurta lot. Madonna, it hurta lot.”

Motioning for her neighbor to sit on the sofa, Willow was as confused as when she first heard the initial crash.

“Maybe I should call an ambulance,” she suggested.

“Ma, che amboolants? I fine. No worria. You go now. I rest.” Mr. Sprunco sprawled out onto his sofa.

“But I think you may have had a heart att—”

“No, you go. If I needa, I call,” Mr. Sprunco insisted. “And no tella you momma, si? I no want she worria for me.”

Willow tried to run everything back in her mind as she walked around the front of her neighbor’s house and back into her own yard. How could someone be that lifeless one moment and as alert as ever the next? It just didn’t make any sense. Willow reminded herself that she was not a doctor and was far from an expert on medical conditions. Maybe Mr. Sprunco just fainted. Nevertheless, she decided to honor her neighbor’s request not to alarm her family as she walked through her back door.

"Hey, there's my master chef," Wyatt greeted his sister, with a half eaten sausage dangling from his fork. "Bananas in the batter? Nice touch, Squirt."

Distracted, Willow did not acknowledge her brother's praise.

"Squirt?"

"Huh? Oh yeah, bananas. I'm glad you enjoyed them, Wyatt."

Her mother noticed her hesitation. Samantha Krimble always knew when one of her children was hiding something.

"Everything alright, Willow?"

"What? Oh, yeah, fine. I was just thinking about my book and how good it is."

"Well, where is it?" asked Mrs. Krimble.

In all of the confusion, Willow had forgotten to retrieve her book.

"I left it outside. I'm going back out to read in a minute. I just came in to say 'good morning.'"

"Well, don't be too much longer. Remember, we're going to visit Grandma this morning. I promised her we'd take her grocery shopping and you know how much she loves your company."

Samantha Krimble was always very busy between her shifts as a nurse at Stratlin Medical, her housework and checking on her 88-year-old mother, who insisted on living on her own, claiming she did not need anyone's help. Nevertheless, the widow tried her best to spend time with her children, even if it was as non-eventful as grocery shopping.

"You should come too," she said to Wyatt.

"Huh?" Wyatt pretended not to hear.

"It wouldn't kill you to spend some time with your grandmother," Mrs. Krimble lectured.

"Sounds great, Mom, but I've got basketball practice today," replied Wyatt, shoving a hunk of pancake into his mouth. "Man, and I really wanted to compare the different colored toilet paper."

His mother shot him a reproachful look.

"I'll be there, Mom," said Willow. "I haven't seen Grams in two weeks."

"Thank you, Willow. Nice to see that someone has their priorities in order around here." Mrs. Krimble raised her eyebrows at her son.

"Basketball practice!" Wyatt defended himself. "I can't miss it. Coach says we need to put the extra time

in on the weekend if we want to beat Grant High next week. They kicked our ass – uh ... assets last time and it was really embarrassing.”

“Nice save,” snickered Willow.

“Yes, very nice,” added Mrs. Krimble, her statement punctuated by a light slap on the back of her son’s head.

Since Mrs. Krimble hated foul language and would not allow it in her home, Wyatt made up his own term that he could use whenever he was angry, shocked or even excited... “Chiklets McFarkus!” he said, rubbing the back of his head.

Mrs. Krimble knew what her son really meant, but she could not truly reprimand him since, technically, it wasn’t foul language; it was Wyatt-language.

“See if ice packs are on sale while you’re shopping,” Wyatt added, giving his head one final brush.

Mrs. Krimble rolled her eyes.

“Let me just grab my book and I’ll be back to help you clean up,” said Willow.

“No way,” replied Mrs. Krimble, pointing toward Wyatt. “This one is long overdue to clean up the dishes. Let *him* take care of it.”

“Well, if you insist,” replied Willow, smirking, shrugging her shoulders at her older brother.

Wyatt stared at the two women of the house in defeat. “Man ... can’t even have breakfast without having to work for it.” With a sigh he plunged his fork into the last sausage link on the plate and muttered, once again, “Chiklets McFarkus!”

Willow and her mother arrived at her Grandma Trisha’s house at about 10:30am. It was a big house, a mere twelve minutes away by car. It was the house that Willow’s mother grew up in. Every time she returned she had another reminiscent story about how she and her older sister, Klisa, would get into trouble on some misadventure. Willow loved listening to these stories about her mother’s childhood, while Wyatt usually zoned out until the end of each tale where he would often retort with, “*Ha! That’s good stuff, Mom. Those were the days, huh?*” Mrs. Krimble never fell for the feigning interest in her stories, but she never called Wyatt on it; she knew there would be plenty of other times where she would need to reprimand her teenage son for not listening. She’d much rather rebuke him when he said things like,

*"...but you never told me to take out the garbage; how was I supposed to know? I'm not a mind-reader..."*

Willow loved visiting with her grandmother. She would try to see her at least once a month. Before Grandpa Theo passed away, he would drive himself and Grandma Trisha to see Willow and Wyatt as often as once a week. Since Grandma Trisha could not drive, due to her arthritis, Willow began taking the bus to visit her after her grandfather's passing, two years ago. From the bus stop, Willow would walk for almost 20 minutes to have tea with her grandmother and discuss whatever was interesting in their lives at the moment. Sometimes, she would bring Razzel along. Grandma Trisha often said that Razzel's spunk reminded her of herself when she was a young girl.

Willow and her mother made their way up the stone walkway to the large two-story colonial home designed by Grandpa Theo. Brushing their shoulders against the overgrown hedges, they walked up to the front porch where Willow used to play checkers with her grandfather. Before Mrs. Krimble could reach the doorbell, the front door swung open.

"Where is she? Where's my favorite girl?"

Willow wrapped her arms around her grandmother and squeezed tightly.

“Hey, Grams ... you look great.”

Trisha Turner stared into her granddaughter’s eyes.

“Such a sweet girl, but a not a very good liar. Now, where is that glutinous grandson of mine?” she asked, looking over Willow’s shoulder, past Mrs. Krimble.

“Sorry, Mom,” replied Mrs. Krimble, stepping over the threshold, “Wyatt has basketball practice this morning. He sends his love,” she added as an obvious afterthought.

“There’s a huge surprise. I guess I’ll just see him again at Thanksgiving dinner. That is, if he’s not too busy. Oh, but there will be lots of food, so he’s sure to be there, isn’t he?”

Willow tried not to laugh while her mother refrained from any retort. Mrs. Krimble learned at an early age that it was best to let her mother’s backhanded comments pass. Trisha Turner was a kind-hearted woman who loved her family, but she was as stern as she was caring. There was no arguing with her and you would never get the final word, so why try?

Grandma Trisha turned her attention back to Willow.

“Well, at least my girl is here. I have something for you.”

“Grams, you don’t have to give me something *every* time I come over; I came to see *you*.”

“Nonsense!” said Grandma Trisha, grabbing a large rectangular box from the coffee table and handing it to Willow. “It’s been collecting dust and I thought you should have it.”

Willow’s eyes lit up. She had an inkling as to what was in the box. Ever since she was a little girl, she had admired a ceramic sculpture of a ballet dancer on her grandparents’ end-table. She used to daydream about one day becoming a graceful ballerina, even with her prosthetic leg. When she turned eight years old, she persuaded her mother to sign her up for a local ballet class, but after only one lesson, Mrs. Krimble took notice of the whispers and snickers from the other students. Ever the overly protective mother, she explained to Willow that the class was too expensive, forcing Willow to give it up. Willow was crushed, but did not argue; she knew her mom had to run their household on a single income.

Willow tore off the strip of tape on the top of the box. Just as she was about to lift up the top flap, she beamed at her grandmother.

“Well, go on,” said Grandma Trisha, “or shall I write you an invitation?”

Willow raised up the flap, reached in, and pulled out her prize. She had to try her best not to look disappointed at the large resin clown she was holding.

“Wow, Grams...” she said through a forced grin, “...I love it.”

“I knew you would. When you were only three years old, you begged me to let you keep it, but I had just brought it home from my trip to Paris with your grandfather and I didn’t want to part with it just yet. I was so possessive of these knick-knacks that your grandfather and I collected, but all of our so-called treasures have been collecting dust. That clown’s been on my nightstand far too long. I just know he will be appreciated in a new home by a new family member.”

Willow held up the statue and rotated it in examination. She didn’t recall admiring it when she was younger, but she did think it was very cool that her grandmother remembered.

"I'll take good care of it, Grams."

"I know you will, Love."

## Chapter Three Mauled At The Mall



It was 3pm when Willow and her mother pulled into their driveway. The supermarket took a lot longer than they anticipated. Grandma Trisha seemed to read every label of every item three times before finally placing it into her cart. Wyatt was in the driveway shooting hoops with two of his teammates. His friends loved going to his house after practice because the fridge was always stocked and they could pretend to keep practicing while they ate Mrs. Krimble out of house and home.

Mrs. Krimble let out a sigh.

“The boys are here. Thank goodness we went to the supermarket. Oh, and look who else is here...”

Willow glanced over to the steps leading up to the side door and spotted a teenage girl sitting there with a look of grave disappointment.

“Razzel!” she blurted, slapping her palm to her forehead. “Oh, what time is it? I promised her we’d go to the mall this afternoon and catch a movie. I told her to

come by at around 2 o'clock." Willow checked her watch. "Oops!"

Willow hopped out of the car and sprinted toward her friend.

"Raz, I'm sorry, I was at my gran—"

"Save it. Cave-Boy already filled me in, but he didn't tell me you would take so long."

"I didn't think they would," said Wyatt, defensively. "I told her to wait; that you would be back any minute. That was..." Wyatt checked his watch and nodded, "...yeah, about 60 minutes ago. But hey, me and the boys kept her company," Wyatt boasted as he landed another three-pointer.

"Company?" Razzel shot daggers at Wyatt. "If you call an hour-long discussion about 'what kind of super power you would want if you could choose one', company..."

"That again?" replied Willow, rolling her eyes. "Every time they get together, it's the same thing: sports, video games and comic books."

Kreb Miller was the first of Wyatt's friends to defend himself. He was a bit of a slob; always un-tucked, greasy-haired and sweaty, and not just on the court. He

could be seen outdoors in the dead of winter in a t-shirt, and would still appear to glisten. Nevertheless, he was a fairly good basketball player for his build.

“Scoff, if you will, young one,” he said, wiping his forehead with his Alien Snatchers T-shirt, “but this is a serious discussion. These two cretins do not understand that the greatest power of all would be to read another’s thoughts.” He placed both index fingers onto his sticky temples. “By knowing what your enemy is thinking, you can infiltrate any plan of attack, no matter what they possess in their arsenal. If you know what’s coming,” his eyes were bulging with excitement, “you can put the kibosh on it. Hell, you can avert ... ARMAGEDDON!”

Razzel looked at Willow, raised both her brows and suddenly exploded into laughter as Willow followed.

Wyatt’s other friend, Tay (short for Taylor), stepped forward and rammed the basketball into Kreb’s mid-section.

“No way, loser,” he taunted. “Everyone wants to fly. Come on, now.” Taylor Centine was a lot cooler than Kreb. He was your typical blonde-haired, blue-eyed jock that all of the girls at school swooned over. He was

one year older than Wyatt and Kreb and considered himself the “leader” of their little group. He was, after all, the captain of The Gripnest Gravediggers, their high school basketball team. “If you can get anywhere by flying, think of what you can prevent by getting there so quickly.”

“Well, if that’s your argument,” Kreb refuted, “what about teleportation? You can travel—”

“How many times do I have to explain it to you scientists,” Wyatt cut in, “none of that matters if you’re susceptible to pain.”

Razzel feigned an impressed expression.

“‘Susceptible’, huh?” she said to Willow. “Not bad for a neanderthal.”

“Super strength is the only power to have,” Wyatt continued, snubbing Razzel’s sarcasm. “Nothing would be able to hurt you. Not bullets, not knives ... not a piano dropped on your head...”

“A piano dropped on your head?” Razzel had heard enough. “So you wanna be Bugs Bunny now?”

Everyone, but Wyatt, began to chuckle.

“What I meant was—”

Razzel cut him off by abruptly raising her right hand, signaling him to stop speaking.

*“All of you are wrong!”* she said. *“Time travel is the best power to have. Wanna know why?”* Everyone was at attention. *“Because if I could go back in time, I would never have stayed for this ridiculous discussion, and I could get back the hour (she checked her watch) and four minutes I just wasted.”* She grabbed Willow’s arm and pulled her forward. *“We’ve got a bus to catch.”*

Wyatt went a bit flush as his sister and her friend walked away.

*“Oh yeah ... well ... if I could go back in time—”*

Wyatt was interrupted yet again, this time by his mother.

*“Boys, I could use a hand with these groceries.”*

Wyatt stormed toward his mother’s car, gritting his teeth.

*“Chiklets McFarkus!”*

The Fritzfield Mall was crowded, as it often was on Saturday afternoons. It was packed with teenagers who were shopping for clothes, catching a movie, eating ice

cream, or just hanging out, hoping to run into some friends.

Willow and Razzel were about to get in line for the movie Razzel wanted to see: *Method To Madness*.

"I've been dying to see this," said Razzel eagerly as they took the escalator to the top floor. "Can you believe it? Hollywood has finally thought to make a movie about a serial killer who makes the mistake of trying to off a psychotic ax-murderer."

Willow rolled her eyes and shook her head.

"Are you sure it's your turn to pick the movie?"

"Positive. You chose that awful drama last month about the kid who finds out his dad was reincarnated as a tree. What was that called again? *Stump Daddy*? What a yawn-fest."

"It was called *Blooming Hearts*, and you missed the whole point on how nature can't be altered and ... oh, never mind. Let me tell you what Grams gave me. You know how she and my grandfather collected souvenirs from wherever they traveled, usually statues?"

Razzel nodded.

"Well," Willow continued, "Grams gave me this cute statue of ... Oh crap!"

"Hmm," replied Razzel, "sounds classy."

"No, look who's on the end of the line."

Razzel looked past the crowd of teens in line for hot pretzels and then she saw them: Shayla Stergus and her boyfriend, Davis Sweany, were on line, waiting to purchase their movie tickets. Davis was holding three shopping bags in one hand and a tray of popcorn and soda in the other. Shayla was holding her cell phone against her ear, wearing an expression of complete and utter irritation, as usual.

"So what?" said Razzel at the sight of their least favorite classmate. "Now we can't go to the movies because *they're* on line for tickets? They're probably going to see *Drama Princess*."

"We can go, but can we just wait until they're in? I'm in no mood for her facial expressions and eye-rolling. Look, we can run into that pet shop for a bit. The movie doesn't start for another twenty five minutes."

"Fine, but only because I need some algae disks for my pleckos."

"What?"

"Food for my bottom-feeding fish."

"Right. Cool. Let's go in."

Upon entering the pet shop, Willow and Razzel realized they had just stepped into chaos. There was a three-year-old boy being carried out by his mother, kicking and screaming, "I want fuzzy puppy! PUPPY!"; a parakeet had gotten out of its cage, and a young clerk was knocking over sacks of bird seed, trying to retrieve it, all the while the shop was mobbed with children tapping, knocking and banging on glass cages and fish tanks.

The two friends squeezed their way through the crowd as far as they could and found themselves stuck in front of a large, open-lid tank filled with an assortment of rabbits and guinea pigs. Customers were allowed to pick up the animals, as long as they did not leave the tank area with them. Willow noticed one brown guinea pig had a huge gash on its left hind thigh. She reached in and gently raised it out of the tank.

Razzel looked into Willow's palm and spotted the animal's injury.

"What's with him?"

The young clerk, who moments earlier was chasing the parakeet, was walking past the tank and overheard Razzel's question.

“Oh, he was attacked by one of his litter,” the clerk responded. “We removed the culprit and placed him in his own cage, but the damage is done, isn’t it?” he continued coldly. “If he doesn’t heal quickly, we’ll just have to shoot him,” he added with a demented smirk.

“You’ll what!” said Willow.

“Kidding, he’s not a horse right? We would just feed him to the snakes.” The clerk walked away to reprimand a little boy who was sticking his pacifier into the iguana tank.

“What a creep,” said Razzel. “Well, let me squeeze through this sea of people to get to the fish food. I’ll be right back.”

While listening to Razzel mutter a frustrated “*excuse me*” over and over, Willow peered down at her new friend sitting in the palm of her hand. He was a short-hair guinea pig, which made his injury even more painful to glimpse. The wound was still fresh and, although it wasn’t gushing blood, the patch of raw flesh showing was quite unnerving. Willow was usually grossed out by such sights, unlike Razzel, but she could not look away from the animal’s grotesque injury.

*Poor little guy.*

Willow redirected her gaze from the injury to the creature's eyes. She felt so sad for him. She loved animals and swore that, when she was older, she would fill her home with them.

"Well, I'd better put you down. I hope you feel better real soon," she whispered to the animal, slowly lowering him into his habitat.

"Are you talking to it?" said a voice over Willow's shoulder.

Willow was so startled to be caught speaking to the animal, she dropped him six inches from the bottom of the tank. He quickly scurried away as Willow turned around to face Razzel.

"Great, now you probably injured his other leg," Razzel teased.

"Well, you scared me. I was kind of zoned out there. Now, where did he run off to?" There were so many similar looking guinea pigs in the tank, running through the cedar chips, it was difficult for Willow to locate the one she was just holding.

Razzel pointed to a chocolate-brown guinea pig.

"Is that him?" she said. "Oh, wait it can't be; he doesn't have that gash on his leg. Well, I'll leave you to

locate and say goodbye to your new boyfriend. Meet me at the counter. I need to pay for this and then we'd better get back on line for those tickets."

While Razzel was at the checkout counter, Willow searched through the rabbits and guinea pigs scurrying around the tank, but she could not seem to locate her new friend. Suddenly a little girl reached in and picked up a chocolate-brown guinea pig that looked exactly like the one Willow returned to the tank, but it couldn't be; there was no raw gash on his thigh. Willow peered back down into the tank and the other brown guinea pigs were noticeably larger than the one she was searching for. She glanced back at the little girl who held up the guinea pig to her mother. Willow squinted to see a small spot of dry blood on the animal's thigh, but there was no injury. The little girl smiled at her mother.

"This one, Mommy. I'm gonna call him Mr. Plimplepot."

# Chapter Four

## Stage Fright



Sundays, when she was not at work, Mrs. Krimble took her children to church. They had to attend the noon mass because Wyatt would never wake up early enough to get to any of the morning masses.

Willow didn't sleep too well on the previous night; she kept on replaying the prior days events in her mind. It all seemed so surreal. Her neighbor went from being lifeless on his floor to perfectly healthy a few minutes later. Then there was the incident in the pet shop. Was she making too much of it or did that guinea pig go from injured, to not having a scratch on him? Was she going crazy? What did it all mean?

Willow was still deep in thought as she and her family took their seats in the pews. She didn't particularly enjoy church. She lost her father at such a young age and always found it difficult to "connect with God," as the Catholic priest would phrase it. She never expressed

anger or hatred toward her church, but she found it quite difficult to believe in all of the amazing miracles described in the bible when her father could not be saved from illness. At least *she* tried to pay attention to the homily; Wyatt often found himself being pinched by his mother for falling asleep and sometimes even snoring lightly... *"What, I wasn't sleeping, I was just blinking for a long time."*

Fifteen minutes into the mass and Willow was still mulling over her thoughts. It came time for the gospel reading and Deacon Bruce took the podium. "A reading from the Holy Gospel according to..." Deacon Bruce's voice was a real sedative. He read the gospel in such an uninspired tone, even Mrs. Krimble had to rub her eyes to keep from drifting off. Wyatt always referred to him as *"Deacon Snooze."*

Amidst her thoughts, Willow caught words here and there, "... heal ... follow ... believe..." Deacon Bruce droned on about someone asking to be healed and "...if you follow God..."

As the reading was coming to a close, Willow tried to pay attention but she kept on thinking about how Carlo

Sprunco had gotten his strength back after she came in contact with him.

*Alright, so he had an attack and then it passed - no big deal, but then ... that guinea pig ... where did his wound go? Maybe it wasn't him. I was so rushed to get out of the pet shop to make the movie, I wasn't looking carefully enough. I looked at the wrong guinea pig. That's it! That has to be it. Don't blow things out of proportion. This isn't one of your fantasy novels."*

Everyone in the church took their seats as the parish pastor, Father Strauburn, took the podium.

"In today's gospel..."

Willow tried to be attentive, but it was difficult. Once she began analyzing something, she became obsessed with it, but then she heard Father Strauburn say something that snapped her out of her analytical trance, "...so you see, anyone can become a healer."

Willow's ears perked up.

"Of course, you cannot put your hands over a blind person's eyes and give them sight, not in the literal sense."

Wyatt leaned over to his sister, "Queue the metaphors and clichés." Mrs. Krimble shot him a chastising look.

"...you can help someone see the light in other ways than with their eyes," Father Strauburn continued.

"Corn anyone?" Wyatt muttered to himself, shaking his head.

"We can heal others in different ways. If a child is stricken with an incurable ailment, you will not be able to dispel their sickness, but by making them laugh, you can heal their hearts, thus bringing them peace."

Wyatt rolled his eyes.

"God does not expect any of you to come up with a cure for paralysis by tomorrow, but by volunteering to take a disabled person to a movie, this is how you can become a healer."

Wyatt let out a yawn. Willow couldn't tell if it was genuine or forced in order to stress his boredom.

"This I say to all of you: Anyone here can be a healer. If you put someone before yourself in order to help them in any way, you will be a healer of the spirit. When you reach a path in your life where you must choose between benefiting yourself, or helping someone

that needs it more than you, and you choose the latter, you will feel the presence of God through your actions. Leave here today and find someone who has lost their smile and aid them in finding it.”

Wyatt checked his watch and let out a sigh.

By Monday morning, Willow had stopped scrutinizing her weekend and was all set for first period: Science. This was one of her favorite classes. Willow liked subjects where things could be broken down into logical explanations, formulas. After being dropped off by her mother, she walked up the school steps where she usually waited for Razzel. Willow took a seat on the top step and decided to wait for her friend, greeting anyone she recognized.

“Hey Daryl... How was your weekend, Freddy... What’s up, Stacey... Thanks Lila, I got them at Delicious Denim last week...”

The school bell, signifying first period, rang out. Groans and exhausted huffs immediately followed. Willow leaned over to pick up her bag when she spotted two pairs of designer shoes that she, unfortunately, recognized.

“Look, Shayla,” Snella Burinbine said with a sadistic smirk, “the school isn’t enforcing the no-pets-allowed rule today.”

“That’s good news for you, Snella,” a voice from behind replied, “or Shayla may have to actually put a leash on you and tie you to a hydrant – a gold one, of course.”

Shayla and Snella whipped around to find Razzel staring them down. Willow was relieved to see her. Willow wasn’t afraid of Shayla or Snella; she just never knew what to say; she could never conjure the quick retorts which Razzel had a knack for.

“Let’s get going, Snella,” said Shayla, surveying Razzel. “I haven’t had my shots yet and if she bites, we *could* be in serious trouble.”

Snella began laughing, repeating Shayla’s retort, “‘Haven’t had my shots yet’ – Woo!”

Razzel put her bag down and clenched her fists, but Willow grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her back. Razzel grabbed her backpack and followed Willow up the stairs, shooting daggers at Shayla and Snella.

“You’ve got good timing, Raz, but you shouldn’t let them get to you. They’re just couple of snobs.”

“I’m so sick of those runway rejects!” barked Razzel. “They think they can get away with saying and doing whatever they want just because they have shiny hair and those picket-fence-white teeth. Well, I can certainly change *that* with one punch.”

“Let ‘em talk, Raz. They’re just words from an empty mind. Let’s get to class before we’re late.”

The school morning had passed uneventfully. Razzel doodled in her notebook during Science class while Willow raised her hand to answer almost every question asked about the anatomy of earth worms; she had already read ahead two chapters last week.

In Math there was a pop quiz. Willow felt she had done fairly well, while Razzel was certain she had just barely scraped by.

In Italian class, however, Razzel was the one to shine. She never raised her hand, but Mrs. Roselli always called on her when no one else could answer and Razzel was correct almost every time. Students were always amazed at how the light-skinned black girl with long, wavy black hair was able to speak and write so fluently in Italian. What most of them didn’t know was

Razzel's parents met in Italy when her mother, Diane Myers, a beautiful African American college student from New York, traveled to Europe to study abroad. She was a Philosophy major with a minor in Fine Arts. It was Italy where she met Razzel's father, Pietro Fiora. The abbreviated story is that they fell in love; boy followed girl back to the states; boy married girl; six years later, girl gets pregnant. The result... "I hate when she always freakin' calls on me! It's mortifying!"

"Oh, come on. I love hearing you speak Italiano, Signora Fiora."

"Cut it out, Will."

"You're not so uptight when you respond to Mr. Sprunco when he speaks to you."

"That's different; he cracks me up. Besides, I don't feel 25 sets of eyes on me when he's around."

"Well, at least it's lunch time."

The two friends noticed a small assembly at the cafeteria bulletin board.

"What now?" said Razzel. "Last time I saw a mob like this out here, it was the great chocolate milk shortage of last fall." She pretended to shudder. "Ohhh — that was terrifying."

Willow recognized Taren Swirkle and Brent Deital, who she and Razzel usually sat with at lunch.

“What’s up, guys?” said Willow.

“Check it out...” replied Brent eagerly, “...a school talent show on December 5th. This is the first year Ginkelman has ever held one. I’m signing up straight away. Seven years of dance lessons are finally gonna pay off.”

“I’ll be there,” chimed Razzel.

“Really?” said Brent, elated.

“Absolutely! And when you’re done dancing, we could all listen to the crickets chirping together.”

Brent’s expression went from blissful to defeated. Taren laughed out loud while Willow tried to suppress her chuckle.

“Don’t listen to her, Brent,” she said, playfully slapping Razzel on the arm, “we’ll all be there to cheer you on.”

“I’m only kidding, man,” said Razzel. “I wouldn’t miss it, especially if those snobs enter. I can’t wait to see them lose at something for once in their lives.”

"I wonder what they would do for the show," said Taren, in her characteristic bubbly tone. "Whatever it is, I'm sure it'll be fun to watch."

Taren Swirle was oblivious to anything negative around her. Last year, Snella smacked her lunch tray out of her hand because she didn't like the way Taren said "Hi." Taren's reply to such a vile and cruel act was, "I think she just wanted to give me 'five' on my hand, but I was too slow for her. It was all my fault."

Razzel noticed Shayla and Snella pushing their way through the crowd to investigate the posted notice that had everyone in such a frenzy.

"Speak of the minions," Razzel muttered.

Shayla glanced at the notice and then curled her upper lip at Snella as if she had just tasted something awful.

"I can't imagine anything more pathetic," she said.

Snella looked in the direction of the four friends behind her and noticed they were all staring at her and Shayla. Razzel in particular wore a look of great disdain.

"Oh, I don't know," said Snella, motioning to Brent who was now writing down the sign-up information in

his notebook, "it should make for some good laughs." She and Shayla then giggled at Brent's fervor to participate.

Willow had to grab Razzel's wrist for the second time that day.

"Let's eat," she said, gesturing to Taren and Brent. "Come on, Raz. Maybe we'll see how far salisbury steak can fly from the rubber band on my retainer."

Razzel unclenched her fists and smirked.

"Now yer talkin'!"

For the remainder of the school week, students could be heard expressing their enthusiasm for the talent show. *"I'm gonna sing that song – the one from that movie..." "I have a hilarious ventriloquist routine..." "I can't wait to do my celebrity impersonations..."*

By Thursday, Razzel would grunt at anyone who mentioned the talent show. "The next person to sing at me better have good medical coverage."

It was the final period of the day on Thursday: English. Although Willow loved to read and write, she was always on edge in Miss Protts' English class, but who wasn't?

Consetta Protts was a crotchety old woman who had been teaching for over 50 years. She was one of those teachers who hated the way the school was being run, hated dealing with students and could barely tolerate the staff. Since announcing, in the beginning of the school year, that this would be her final year teaching, she was exceptionally callous toward any student that dared cross her.

Most students knew better than to provoke her. Even Razzel would not dare respond to Miss Protts in her usual tone of sarcasm; she knew the consequences would be dire.

Miss Protts was never married and none of the students needed to waste any time wondering why.

“The bell rang six seconds ago, Spritzman! Why do I still hear your yap going? Take your seat, Phillips or I’ll make you stand the entire period! Spit out that gum, Rogers, or you’ll be wearing it on your nose for the remainder of the school year!”

Snella rolled her eyes, pulled out her cell phone and began texting Shayla, who was sitting in the seat directly in front of her. Miss Protts immediately snatched the phone out of Snella’s hand.

“Hey, that was a gift from my Dad!” barked Snella, “I’d better get it back!”

Miss Protts glared at Snella for moment.

“No worries, Princess,” she said, walking around to the front of her teacher’s desk. She opened up the top drawer, pulled out a large, rusty metal stapler, placed the cell phone on her desk and proceeded to smash it four times. She brushed the remains of the former phone into her drawer, returned the stapler to its place and slammed her desk drawer shut. She looked up at Snella, who appeared horrorstricken. “You can just pick it up right after class, Your Highness.”

Shayla’s jaw dropped at her friend’s predicament, while the remainder of the class fell silent. Willow gave Razzel a cautious look. Razzel returned a satisfied grin.

“Anyone else have any toys I can play with? No? Fine! Maybe we can actually learn something today!”

Miss Protts proceeded to pull out a stack of papers from her bottom desk drawer.

“Last week, while studying 17<sup>th</sup> Century poetry, I gave you all an assignment to write your own poem based on anything that was important to you in your

lives — anything at all. I felt this was a simple assignment and expected to read a broad scope of poetry.

“Some of you decided to write about your pets...” Miss Protts continued, handing papers back to their previous owners, “...so it should come as no surprise to those people that I gave them an **F! YOU MISSED THE WHOLE POINT, JORKINS!**” she snapped at a student, startling him into almost falling out of his seat. “Life isn’t about how happy you feel when your constipated turtle craps in his tank!” A few students stifled a laugh.

“There were a few of you, and I mean *a few*, that *actually* understood that life is about more than just material, tangible things.” She proceeded to hand Willow back her paper, giving her an unreadable expression, as only Miss Protts could.

Willow swallowed hard before looking down at her paper. She loved to write, but Miss Protts was tough to please. At the beginning of the semester, Miss Protts announced that she never gave anyone an A. “An A *implies perfection and nobody is perfect; there is always room for improvement.*”

When Willow finally looked down at her paper, she was bewildered. There was no grade — only a note in

red ink that read, *See me after class*. Willow became unnerved. What could it mean?

For the remainder of the period, Miss Protts gave an overview of the next book they would need to read and explained the new assignment.

“Re-write the ending in three pages or more. Change it to whatever you think will fit according to the way you feel about the characters. **JORKINS!**” The student jumped up once again. “Let’s leave your turtle out of it this time.”

“Y-yes, Miss Protts.”

As soon as the bell rang, Willow turned around to look at Razzel.

“I need to stay,” Willow whispered to her best friend. “She wants to see me about my poem.”

Razzel just shrugged her shoulders and flipped her poem around so Willow could see the big red **B-** on it.

“Not bad, Raz,” said Willow.”

“For this class,” replied Razzel, “it’s pretty damn good. I’ll take it. Thanks for all your help, Will. What did you get?”

“I don’t know yet. That’s what she wants to see me about.” Willow held up her paper for Razzel to see.

“**KRIMBLE!**” Both Willow and Razzel flinched at the bellow coming from the front of the classroom. “What’s taking so long? Front and center!” Miss Protts shouted, packing up her bag for the day.

Willow and Razzel quickly gathered their belongings and hurried to the front of the class as the remainder of the students filed out; Snella and Shayla still looking scandalized over the cell phone incident.

“Forget something, Fiora?” Miss Protts barked at Razzel. Razzel shook her head. “Then why am I still looking at you?”

Razzel gave Willow an *I’ll meet you outside* look and quickly exited the classroom. No one was left behind but Willow and Miss Protts.

“Hell of a poem, Krimble; not bad at all. A bit sappy for my taste, but I see potential in you. And don’t think I haven’t noticed Fiora’s writing improving. No doubt you’ve been helping her along.”

“I—”

“Oh, it’s fine, Krimble. I don’t have a problem with students working together as long as you’re not writing it for her.”

“I—”

“Listen up, Krimble, because they don’t pay me extra for repeating myself. There’s the school assembly tomorrow at two o’clock so Principal Sabina can welcome new students and brag about what a great job she *thinks* she’s doing with this school.” Miss Protts rolled her eyes. “She’s under the delusion that the heads of each department want to share their curriculum for the year and what’s more, she actually thinks the students will give a rat’s rump.”

Willow stood silently with her mouth half open. What did any of this have to do with her poem?

“So, I had a thought,” Miss Protts continued, “rather than having my blood pressure go through the roof at the sight of hundreds of blank stares gazing up at me, I can introduce *you* and you can share your poem with the rest of the school. Who knows, since it will be a student speaking, maybe they’ll actually pay attention; maybe they’ll actually learn something. What do you say, Krimble?”

“I—”

“Great! I thought you might like the idea. You may want to work on that stutter though.”

Miss Protts picked up her bag and headed toward the door, leaving Willow petrified at the thought of having to address the entire school.

“Oh, and Krimble...” Miss Protts peaked her head back into the classroom, “...you got an A-.”

Willow smiled.

“Are you crazy!” shouted Razzel from the other end of the phone. “I already told you this afternoon, you have to read that poem in front of everyone. You’ve been writing for years, Will. This is a great opportunity for you.”

“What if people laugh at me?” said Willow, lying on her bed, gazing up at the paint-chipped ceiling.

“Boo freakin’ hoo. ‘*What if people laugh at me?*’” Razzel impersonated Willow in a childish tone. “You’ve got talent, Will. Show it off. Remember when I went for my brown belt in Jiu-Jitsu and I was really nervous before my test? You told me I shouldn’t worry because I was just going to express my talent in something that I loved. I guess you just don’t practice what you preach.”

“Alright, alright, I’ll read the stupid poem.”

“Good! What’s it about anyway?”

“Nuh-uh. If you want me to read it out loud, you’ll just have to wait until everyone else hears it.”

“What-evs. I gotta go anyway. Dinnertime. Dad made fried calamari. I can’t wait.”

“Yuck! Deep-fried squid.” Willow contorted her face as if she had just tasted something awful.

“You need some culture, girl. See you tomorrow. And stop worrying. You’ll do great.”

The following day, Willow was a bundle of nerves. She could barely concentrate in any of her classes and she skipped lunch entirely. She spent the period in the library reviewing her poem over and over again, changing her mind every minute on which words to emphasize at what point.

Before Willow knew it, it was 2pm and the entire school was gathered in the auditorium. She had to sit in the front row with a group of faculty members, some of which she recognized. She sat between Miss Protts and Mr. Zingrout, her math teacher. Once everyone was seated, Principal Sabina took the podium.

“Good afternoon,” she said in a sickly-sweet tone. Principal Gretchen Sabina always claimed she wanted

to be friends with every student, but if you ever caused any trouble in her school; if you ever broke one of her many precious decrees, she would turn into a rabid dog. Her philosophy was: *“As long as you follow the rules, we should not have any problems.”*

“Welcome Ginkelman faculty and students. Classes have been in session for several weeks now and I felt that it would be prudent at this time to not only greet the new students, but welcome back returning faces.” A group of 8<sup>th</sup> graders sitting behind Willow huffed.

“This year promises to be...”

Willow could barely pay attention; she was uneasy about reading on stage in front of hundreds of students. *It'll all be over soon*, she told herself. Her thoughts were interrupted by Miss Protts turning toward her for some last minute instruction.

“Now remember, Krimble, once I’m called up, you follow me, but wait behind the drawn curtain over there. This way, you can at least have an entrance rather than come off as a stalker, tailing me.”

“...and I am certain that you do not all wish to hear my soothing tones for the entire hour,” Principal Sabina joked. “At this time, I’d like to introduce our yearbook

committee who wishes to address the 8<sup>th</sup> grade class on how they can participate in putting together the best yearbook Ginkelman Middle School has ever seen. Please welcome some of the members of the yearbook committee, led by Miss Shayla Stergus.”

Shayla walked out onto the stage wearing a huge, phony grin that Willow read as: *I really don't want to be here, but it looks good on my school transcripts.* She was tailed by Snella and two other girls, who Willow recognized as Candace Strenner and Fusia Plister. Candace and Fusia were always tailing Shayla and Snella. They were almost as popular and every bit as wicked. Willow could not believe it; she was on edge enough, without having to follow this line-up of beauty queens.

After listening to Shayla speak in the most spurious tone Willow had ever heard, she turned around to spot Razzel three rows behind her, sitting between Taren and Brent, looking completely exasperated by Shayla's speech. She could see Razzel sticking her finger down her throat, pretending to make herself gag. This made Willow feel better.

“...so please, we want everyone to join in and take part in this time-honored tradition,” said Shayla, never

losing her phony smile. "And remember, without school-spirit, a school is just another big building," she concluded to a large round of applause from most of the assembly. Razzel expressed her school-spirit by sitting with her arms crossed, shaking her head in disbelief.

Principal Sabina took the podium once again.

"Thank you, Shayla. Now, I would like to call upon one of our most celebrated faculty members, and the head of our English Department here at Ginkelman, Miss Consetta Protts."

As Miss Protts stood up to walk toward the stage steps, Willow followed a few steps behind her. Clutching her paper, Willow heard Miss Protts mumble, "'Celebrated'? That's just a fancy way of saying *old*."

As Miss Protts took her time walking up the four steps leading to the stage, Willow's heart jackhammered. Once on stage, she tucked herself behind the curtain, only to realize she wasn't alone. Shayla and her cronies had decided to lag behind, rather than take their seats in the auditorium with the "ordinary" students. Snella was the first to notice the newcomer.

"Well, hello, Shakespeare," she said. "Look, Shayla, a

celebrity sighting. Why, it's the star of our English class."

"Teacher's pet," Candace added as the other girls laughed.

Willow found these comments easy to ignore. Being insulted by this lot was nothing new to her and she had to focus on the task at hand. There were hundreds of students to address; the four behind the curtain were irrelevant. She could hear Miss Protts begin her announcement.

"Last week, I assigned my 8<sup>th</sup> grade classes to..."

Continuing to ignore the whispers and snickers behind her, Willow hung on Miss Protts' every word.

"...so, pay attention. This is what you are capable of when you apply yourselves. Miss Willow Krimble will now read her assignment, which earned her the highest grade I have given out in seven years."

Willow felt her insides tense up as the applause rang in her ears. She had to leave the comfort of the concealing curtain. Clasping her poem tightly in both hands, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She took one step forward and then...

**CRASH!**

The auditorium roared with laughter. Willow tried to stand, but realized that her prosthetic leg had come loose under her jeans and her right ankle was throbbing from the fall. As the audience noticed her fumble with her prosthetic limb, the laughter began to die down. She began to crawl back toward the curtain and heard howling laughter coming from the four girls behind it.

“Good one, Snella,” said Shayla.

“Hey, not my fault she tripped over my foot,” replied Snella. “She should have been paying attention.”

As Willow reached the curtain, she pulled herself up and was finally able to adjust her limb into its proper place. Just as she was about to storm off stage, a fifth face appeared from the far side of the curtain.

“Will, you alright?” asked a highly concerned Razzel.

“I’ll be fine,” replied Willow, trying to fight back tears, listening to the faint murmurings of the crowd.

“What happened?” asked Razzel, suddenly taking notice of her present company.

“Your friend here’s a bit clumsy,” chimed Snella. “But I do have long legs,” she added rubbing her outer thigh. “I guess they tend to get in the way sometimes, although I’m not sure how you can miss them since

they are so... (Snella rubbed her calves with both hands) ...perfectly formed."

The laughter from Shayla, Candace and Fusia was all Razzel could stand. She pounced onto Snella with the ferocity of a starving cougar hunting its prey. Razzel was a skilled martial artist, but when the rage took over, she just started swinging and hitting whatever wasn't protected.

It took Snella's entire peanut gallery and Willow to pry Razzel off just in time for Miss Prott's to appear behind the stage curtain.

"What in the name of fermented prune juice is going on back here?" she said, taking notice of Snella's bloody nose and disheveled hair.

"*She* tripped Willow on purpose!" Razzel spat, panting heavily, pointing to Snella.

"Did she, now?" said Miss Prott's, surveying Snella.

"Actually," Shayla interjected before Snella could respond, "I didn't see her do it, and I'm sure Candace and Fusia didn't see anything either, and we were back here the entire time."

Candace and Fusia nodded in agreement, smiling sardonically.

“So, Miss Protts,” Shayla pressed forward, “if you didn’t see it, there’s really nothing you can do about it, is there? As far as *you* know, Willow here just ... tripped.” Shayla shrugged her shoulders, sneering at Willow.

Willow was humiliated, Razzel was seething and Miss Protts was frustrated.

“I don’t have time for this twaddle,” barked Miss Protts. “Burenbine, get to the nurse’s office and take care of that nose. The custodian has enough to do around here without having to mop up your blood.”

Snella took out a tissue from her purse and began cleaning herself up.

“You’ll pay for this!” she snarled at Razzel. “I’ll see that you get expelled!”

“Actually,” Miss Protts grunted, “since I didn’t actually see Fiora hit you, there is really nothing I can do about it.” She glared at Shayla. “As far as I know...” she turned her gaze back to Snella, “...you just tripped.”

Snella turned scarlet and stomped off; Shayla ran to comfort her; Candace and Fusia followed suit.

Willow could hear Principal Sabina instructing everyone in the auditorium to “*settle down while we sort through this...*”

Miss Protts threw her gaze back at Willow.

“You’re up, Krimble,” she said in a very matter-of-fact tone, as if the last three minutes had never transpired.

“What? I can’t go out there *now!*”

Razzel grabbed Willow by her shoulders and spun her around.

“Don’t let those creepy cover girls ruin your moment, Will. I believe in you. You can do this!”

Willow looked into Razzel’s eyes, then up at Miss Protts, over her shoulder and into the anticipatory audience. She finally turned back to Razzel.

“I’m sorry, Raz, but you’re wrong ... I can’t.”

Willow stormed down the steps and through the emergency exit door in the front of the auditorium. She crumpled up the printout of her poem and tossed it into the first trashcan she passed.

Willow wasn’t one for breaking school rules, but she retrieved her books from her locker and headed to the public bus stop. She stared blankly out the window for

the entire ride, worried about what she might endure on Monday morning; how every student in school would stare at her, whispering behind her back.

When Willow got home, she walked in through the front door and heard voices emanating from the kitchen, but had no desire to investigate who they belonged to.

“Willow? Is that you?” Mrs. Krimble’s voice called out.

“I’m going to my room,” replied Willow, trying to hide the dejection in her tone.

“You’re home early? Come and say *hello* to your grandmother.”

Willow wiped her tears on her sleeve. The last thing she wanted was an audience. Ordinarily, Willow would be thrilled to visit with her grandmother, but today... *Just say hello, and get out of there.*

She walked into the kitchen, trying not to limp from the pain she still felt in her right ankle, to find her mother and grandmother at the table, having tea and cake. Wyatt was wolfing down his dessert, leaning over the kitchen counter.

"Hey, Squirt," said Wyatt, his mouth full of cake. "Black Forest ... my favorite."

"Every cake is your favorite," added Mrs. Krimble.

Grandma Trisha took one look at Willow and knew something was wrong.

"Are you okay, Willow? Your face is so flush."

Willow kissed her grandmother on the cheek.

"I'm fine," she responded, turning around curtly to leave the kitchen.

"Freeze, little miss," said Mrs. Krimble, stopping Willow in her tracks. "What happened?"

Willow turned around to face her family.

"Nothing. Everything's fine. Can I go now?"

"I just want to be sure that—" but before Mrs. Krimble could finish, Willow had turned away from them and stormed out of the kitchen, grateful that she had not informed her family of her plans to read one of her poems to the entire school.

"She's crazy," said Wyatt. "Black Forest!"

Grandma Trisha stood up.

"I'll talk to her."

"Good luck," replied Mrs. Krimble. "She's a sweetheart, but she never opens up to anyone."

Without another word, Grandma Trisha marched out of the kitchen and up the stairs. When she reached Willow's room, she didn't bother knocking. She opened the door abruptly to find her granddaughter sobbing into her pillow.

"So, what happened?"

Willow quickly sat up, wiping the tears from her face.

"Nothing," she said, her words accompanied by a heavy sniff.

Grandma Trisha walked to the edge of the bed, picked up a large stuffed cat, tossed it onto the floor and sat down beside her granddaughter.

"Talk to me. Nothing can be *that* bad."

Willow's low weeping was slowly turning into a steady stream of tears.

"Are you hurt?" asked Grandma Trisha.

"N-no."

"Has someone died?" Grandma Trisha's tone was peppered with sarcasm, which Willow did not appreciate at the moment.

"No!"

"Good. We just ruled out the only two things that should make you cry like that. Now, what happened?"

Accepting the fact that her grandmother was not going to relent until Willow spoke to her...

"Grams, I ... I just wanna be..." Willow looked down at her prosthetic leg "...perfect."

Grandma Trisha looked at her granddaughter and smiled; then she began to laugh. Willow did not like where this was headed.

"Perfect!" Grandma Trisha repeated. "Perfect? Well, I can't think of anything more dreary and boring in this entire world than being *perfect*." She stopped laughing quite suddenly. With a stern expression, she extended her right hand and made her demand: "Dictionary!"

Willow looked confused.

"All these books in here; your fantasy novels and fairy tales, you are telling me that you do not own one dictionary?"

Willow got up from her bed in a huff, opened up the top, side drawer of her desk, and pulled out a thick red book. With great apprehension, she handed it to her grandmother.

Grandma Trisha flipped through the book until she got to the P's.

“Let’s see here, ah yes ... *Perfect*. I’ll spare you the long detailed definition of this wretched word, but here are some synonyms and adjectives used to describe it: *Accurate ... Precise ... Exact ... Correct ...* Oh, this is a good one: *Conforming to the ideal type*. Hmm ... I wonder who decides the ideal type,” she said rubbing her chin.

Willow was waiting for her grandmother to make her point so that she could continue feeling sorry for herself.

Grandma Trisha closed the book and placed it on her lap.

“Is that what my granddaughter wants to be? *Accurate and precise?*”

Willow responded by staring blankly at her artificial limb, unconsciously running her fingers over it.

“Willow, did I ever tell you how I fell in love with your grandfather?”

Willow turned her attention back to her grandmother.

“No,” she replied, her tone only slightly louder than a whisper.

“We met in high school. I was dating Chet Barker at the time. He was what girls today would refer to as a

*hottie*. Blonde hair, blue eyes, on the football team, although don't ask me what position he played because even back then I could care less about such a barbaric, dull-as-dishwater sport. Anyway, he was the perfect male specimen. My friends (she made quote marks with her fingers) were all envious and even my father approved, and he didn't even like *me* very much. But that is another story for another day.

"I knew your grandfather from some of my classes and I always thought he was very handsome, but he was part of a different crowd. I spent my time with cheerleaders, jocks... *We* only associated with the elite. Your grandfather was an artist who didn't (she made quote marks with her fingers again) 'conform to the ideal type'. His clothes were all second-hand; he worked for his father at the gas station; he didn't have a huge trust fund waiting for him ... you get the picture."

Willow dried her eyes and was now listening intently.

"So how did you guys get together?"

"Patience, young one; we are getting to that. There was a school dance Junior year, and any gala at the school meant all of the girls had to look their best to try

and out-do one another. I looked stunning that evening. A cream-colored dress that fell just to the knee – I had amazing legs back then – and my hair was done up in a bun. I could have walked the red carpet on Oscar night and turned a few heads.” Grandma Trisha looked up towards the ceiling for a moment as if recalling a distant, memory. She then shook her head to shake off the mental cobwebs, often left behind by daydreams. She resumed eye contact with her audience.

“Late that evening, while Chet was off getting us drinks, his best friend, Dale Stitzel, hit on me; I’ll spare you the raunchy details. I felt I should tell Chet straight away and so I did, right in front of Dale and a group of our friends. Of course, Dale denied it; said he was just trying to compliment the way that I looked that evening.”

“Creep!”

“That’s what I said, but Chet took Dale for his word and we got into a huge shouting match. We began to draw quite a crowd, me calling Chet and Dale several words that you wouldn’t find in this dictionary.”

Willow cracked a brief smile.

“Of course that was nothing compared to what Chet and Dale began calling *me* in front of, what appeared to be at the time, the entire school. Everyone, including my so-called girlfriends, began laughing at me. They wouldn’t dare go against the two most popular boys in Dramden High. That’s when your grandfather, who was only there to help work the sound equipment for some extra pocket money, stepped in and told the two biggest stars of the football team that *‘they’d better apologize to the lady, or else.’* They both laughed right in his face and a split second later, your grandfather punched Dale square in the nose. Blood spattered all over Suzy Chessel’s gown – I hated her. But the events that followed made me realize your grandfather was the man for me.”

“He beat them both up in front of everyone?” asked Willow.

“Oh, no; not at all. He got his clock polished. You see, once he hit Dale, the entire football team jumped in and ... well, thank goodness the chaperones were there to break it up, or there may not have been anything left of him for me to eventually marry.”

Willow's brief feeling of excitement was suddenly extinguished. Grandma Trisha pressed forward.

"The next morning was Saturday and I took the bus over to his father's gas station. He was pretty banged up and his left eye was swollen shut. I thanked him for defending me and asked him what he was thinking, going up against those goons; he had to know it wouldn't be a fair fight."

Willow could see that her grandmother's eyes were beginning to look a bit moist. This rarely happened.

"He told me that all he wanted to do was direct the attention away from *me* so that people would stop laughing at me. He said he knew that by hitting Dale, he would get pounced on and then no one would be poking fun at..." Grandma Trisha swallowed the lump which had recently formed in her throat "...the prettiest girl in all of Bingham County.' So, I had no choice, but to kiss him. By Monday everyone at school knew we were a couple."

Willow sat up a little straighter.

"We were mocked in every hallway and classroom by anyone who wanted to remain on Chet's good side. I stopped caring about what people, who meant nothing

to me, thought. I made some new friends, some real friends. I got to know the most interesting people who I never would have met had I remained a card-carrying member of the circle of superiors. That was the first time since I had started high school that I was truly happy. Your grandfather didn't have much and he wasn't very popular, but he made me feel like a queen."

Willow's disheartened expression broke into a grin.

"Well, you know the rest of the story, don't you? After graduation we were married, struggled financially for a bit, and then, because your grandfather refused to accept what everyone thought was in the cards for him – running that decrepit gas station for his father – we moved out east and came to New York where he became one of the greatest architects in the country.

"He never cared about the money either; he did it because he loved it and he was great at it. He had fun with every new thing he tried and he tried everything that interested him because he never cared about being ... *Perfect*. He wanted life to be *great*."

Willow looked pensive at the last thing her grandmother had said, almost confused.

*"Perfect has boundaries, Willow. Perfect ends at a certain point because it is so precise and exact that it cannot go beyond its own limitations. It's technically correct and it's safe, but if you stop worrying about what's perfect, then great things can happen because you are bound and shackled by nothing."*

Willow peered into her grandmother's gaze.

"So I ask you now, Willow, do you really wanna be perfect..." Grandma Trisha leaned across the bed until she was practically touching noses with her granddaughter, "...or do you wanna be great?"

Willow smiled.

"Smart girl."

## Chapter Five

### Searching For Answers



The next morning, Willow attempted to put the previous day's events behind her. She felt a lot better about having to face her classmates come Monday. Razzel called her Friday evening to assure her that she would "pound the pie filling" out of anyone who poked fun at Willow. They made plans for Saturday evening to get two cartons of ice cream and watch a double feature of Willow's choosing. Razzel would bring the ice cream to avoid having Wyatt eat it all before she got there.

Until the evening arrived, Willow went about her usual Saturday morning routine: She read her latest book, *The Sinister Sister*, for a few hours before doing some chores. After vacuuming the rugs and cleaning the downstairs bathroom, she decided to check the grocery list her mother left for her on the refrigerator. Mrs.

Krimble left for work early in the morning and asked Willow to pick up a few things at the local grocery store. Wyatt was at Kreb's house with Tay, working on some new plays, which Willow suspected meant playing *Hell Hoops* on Kreb's video game system. Willow pulled the grocery list off of the fridge, grabbed money from the food envelope on the kitchen counter, put on her fall coat and headed out the door.

The local market, Kresh Fruits, was only a seven-minute walk and Willow loved the cool breeze ushered in by the Fall season. As soon as she walked into the market, she made eye contact with the store's owner, Haskel Kresh. He was a tall lumbering man with hands the size of baseball mitts. Mr. Kresh knew the Krimbles for many years and always treated the entire family with the utmost respect, as he did with all of his loyal customers. He gave Willow a welcoming smile as she grabbed a shopping basket.

"Hey, little lady," said Mr. Kresh through a broad grin, walking toward Willow.

"Hi, Mr. Kresh. How's business?"

"Eh," he said, shrugging his shoulders, "could be better, I s'pose."

This was his response every time, even though his store was always mobbed with people from the neighborhood and nearby towns who loved the quality Kresh Fruits offered. The produce was always fresh and if it wasn't, Mr. Kresh would refuse to sign for it: *"This ain't fresh an' I ain't payin' fer it! Go sell them worm-filled cherries to one of them big supermarkets, ya crook!"*

Willow filled her basket with skim milk, ground beef, eggs, bread crumbs, granola, lettuce, tomatoes and cucumbers, scratching each item off the list with her pen as she collected them.

She took her groceries to the checkout counter and glanced curiously at the boy behind it. She knew just about every employee in Kresh Fruits, but the red-headed boy behind the register did not appear familiar to her. He sported a short ponytail that barely reached his shoulders, an earring and an expression of complete boredom. Willow gave him a smile. The boy did not return it.

Mr. Kresh walked over to the check-out area to address Willow's cashier.

"You treat this here girl good, ya got me, kid?" he said, pointing to Willow. "She's practically family."

The boy never made eye contact, but merely grabbed the eggs and ran them over the scanner.

“Oh! I’m talkin’ ta you! You want this here job ‘er not?”

The boy at the register mumbled something to signify an affirmative response, but Willow barely comprehended it as a human sound.

“That’s betta,” said Mr. Kresh, turning his attention back to Willow. “My sista’s kid – adopted. She and the husband adopts a kid, the husband leaves and now I’m stuck wit ‘em both.” Mr. Kresh waved both hands in the air as he stormed away.

Willow handed the boy her money as soon as he scanned the final item.

“So you’re his nephew?” she said, bagging up her groceries, realizing the boy had no intention of doing it.

The boy grunted as he punched in the dollar amount. He seemed confused.

Willow realized he had hit \$250 rather than \$20.50.

“Oh, you just have to give me back—”

“I got it!” the boy barked over his shoulder as he pulled out the change.

Willow decided not to engage this new employee in any further conversation. She accepted her change and made her exit. She crossed the street, groceries in hand. Instead of turning right at the corner, she decided to cut through the park.

Willow loved cutting through Shashaw Park. She grew up going to the park with her family almost every weekend. She and Razzel would have a blast on the teeter-tot. Willow laughed every time she walked past it, recalling how she used to put large stones in her pockets so that when she teetered down, Razzel would have to remain suspended in the air until Willow decided to let her back down again. "*Down! Down now!*" Razzel would demand. "*Me tellin' mommy ... you get big troubles!*" She never told.

Willow walked past a group of Long Island mothers who were chatting on a bench, not paying much attention to any of the children in the park. She overheard bits of the conversation...

"...and I told Alison we were only staying for 20 minutes because Mommy needs a manicure. She'd better wrap it up on those monkey bars. Just look at these cuticles."

Willow walked past the swirly-slide and was only a few yards away from the park's south gate when she heard a thud followed by wailing cries. She turned around to spot a little blonde girl, no more than three years old, sitting on the ground, rubbing her left knee in pain.

"Hurt! Boo-boo! Mommy!" These sounds were followed by more wailing cries.

Willow placed her groceries on the grass and ran over to the little girl, whose face was now soaked with tears.

"Oh, it's okay, sweetie," Willow assured the toddler, rubbing her back, noticing the pant tear on her right knee. "It's just a scrape."

The little girl did not see it that way.

"Hurt! Hurt!" she shouted, rocking back and forth on her backside.

"Here, let me help you up." Willow gently grasped the little girl's right hand and elbow. "That's it ... nice and easy."

Realizing she could still stand, the little girl began to calm down. Willow untied her blue and yellow hair-kerchief and wrapped it around the little girl's knee to cover up the wound. There wasn't much blood, but she

figured if the little girl could not see her injury, she might not be as frightened.

Willow was right; the little girl began to wipe her face with her palms and was now only sniffing heavily. Willow had a great mentor when it came to comforting others. Her mother was a nurse and, while growing up, Willow never minded getting a fever or a cold to have her mother nurse her back to health with lots of attention, bed-side stories and endless mugs of hot chocolate.

“You’re all set, cutie. Now, all we need to do is find your —”

“Mommy!” cried the little girl pointing over Willow’s left shoulder.

“There you are, Alison! I’ve been looking all over for you. I told you: 20 minutes. Why is your face all red? What’s that around your leg?”

“She just scraped her knee and I wrapped it up for her,” Willow responded for her patient.

“Well ... aren’t *you* helpful,” the mother said condescendingly, as if Willow was implying the woman was shirking her responsibilities, not tending to her child sooner. “I think she’ll be just fine without...” —the

mother untied the kerchief from her daughter's leg—  
“...I thought you said she scraped her knee?”

“She did,” replied Willow, but when she looked at the little girl's knee through the hole in her pants, there wasn't a scratch on it.

The mother surveyed Willow, her eyes scanning her up and down. She then held out the kerchief with two fingers as if it was the foulest thing she had ever touched. Willow anxiously accepted it back.

Without another word to Willow, the mother grabbed her daughter by the arm and began leading her away. Willow heard her muttering something to her daughter about “...designer pants...” and “...talking to strangers...” but the little girl was too busy waving good-bye to Willow to care. Willow waved back, forcing a smile on the outside while, on the inside, she was as bewildered as ever.

That evening, Willow and Razzel chose to watch two films based on novels Willow had read: *Roses On Stone Steps* and *The Frozen Summer*. Razzel almost regretted giving Willow free rein when renting the films, but she wanted her to cheer up and was willing to endure four

hours of boredom if it meant her friend taking her mind off of one of the most humiliating moments of her life.

Razzel fell asleep halfway through the second film. Willow checked her watch: 9:12pm. Razzel's mother was coming to pick her up at 10pm. She decided to let Razzel sleep until then.

The first film, the ice cream and the frozen pizza had done the trick; Willow was not thinking about her stage-spill at all. But she found it difficult to ignore the incident in the park. This reflection led her to wonder about the guinea pig in the pet shop where her thoughts inevitably carried her to her neighbor's immediate recovery from his collapse. Was she losing it, or did she actually have the power to... *Don't be stupid*, she thought.

She let the movie play while her mind continued to wander. What if she *could* heal others? But why her? Why now? Willow lost track of time and, in the middle of her analytical conference, was startled by the doorbell. She turned off the movie, woke up Razzel and answered the door.

Mrs. Fiora was standing there, keys in hand, her car parked in the driveway.

“Hello, angel,” she said to Willow, bending down to exchange kisses on the cheek.

“Hey, Mrs. Fiora,” said Willow. “How’s Mr. Fiora doing? How’s the Deli?”

“Oh, business is great, thank goodness, but he’s always so tired because he takes on too much. He refuses to hire any help. He’s been in bed for an hour already.”

“I hear ya. My mom went to bed right after dinner. She’s been taking on all sorts of crazy shifts.”

“Looks like someone else needs her bed,” said Mrs. Fiora, noticing Razzel rubbing her eyes, yawning.

“Let’s just say Will’s flick picks were ... stimulating,” replied Razzel, grabbing her coat. “Later, Will.”

“See you tomorrow afternoon, Raz.”

Earlier in the evening, Willow and Razzel made plans to do some schoolwork at the library the following day. They needed to start their research paper on homeostasis for Science class. If they did a report of three pages or more, it would count as extra credit toward their final end-of-term grade. They would meet at Razzel’s house since the library was closer to her.

“Oh, don’t forget, Raz, I’m taking the Railroad tomorrow instead of the bus. It may be a rip-off, but it’s so much faster and the library’s right across the highway.”

“I might be home tomorrow afternoon if you need a ride,” Mrs. Fiora offered.

“Don’t sweat it,” said Willow, “Wyatt owes me money for doing some of his chores, so the ride’s on him.”

Mrs. Fiora nodded.

“Alright, but come by the house afterwards. I’ll make brownies for the two scholars.”

“Sounds great,” replied Willow. “See you tomorrow.”

Sunday morning seemed to fly by. After church, Willow grilled some ham and cheese paninis for her family. Mrs. Krimble had the day off and was a bit disappointed to find out both her children had plans, but she immediately found solace within the realization of having a free day to do whatever she pleased. Willow and Wyatt promised to be home in time for a family dinner.

After lunch, Willow walked six blocks to catch the 1:40 train out of Samoset station.

She called Razzel just before leaving home and told her to meet her at the bottom of the east-side staircase at her stop. When she got on the train, it was so crowded that she had to stand. Since it was only for one stop, she didn't mind.

Willow exited the train at the Odina station and watched as a crowd of people fled to the staircases, each of them acting as if they had an urgent appointment that, if missed, the world would never be quite the same.

A group of teenage boys brushed past Willow so quickly, one of them stepped on her right foot.

“OWWWE!”

No one bothered to turn around to investigate the yelp. Bending down to rub her foot, Willow noticed one man was not storming down any staircase or racing for the elevator; he took a seat on a bench on the platform as if waiting for another train. Willow noticed he was wearing large sunglasses and he had a long, thin metal cane, which he clanked against the bench before he took his seat.

*He's Blind.*

A strange sensation came over Willow. She found herself walking toward the stranger.

*Don't be crazy ... Everything was just a weird coincidence ... Don't make a fool of yourself.*

When Willow reached the benches, there was no one left on the platform. She hesitated for a moment, then pretended to clear her throat.

"Ahem ... excuse me, sir, do you need any help?"

The man smiled but did not turn his head from his forward gaze.

"Thanks for asking, but I'm waiting for someone."

"Oh ... okay." Willow noticed a cell phone clipped to the man's waist. "Well, if you speak to your friend, let 'em know that you're on the bench directly across from The Purple Pear Diner. I mean it's across the highway, of course."

The man repeated his smile, still facing straight ahead.

"That's great to know, thanks for your help. If he doesn't show up soon, I'll give him a call and let him know. Last time he met me here, he ended up on the opposite end of the platform and got annoyed that I gave him the wrong location. You'd think he'd cut me

some slack." The stranger grinned and pointed to his glasses.

Willow let out a slight giggle, but then wondered whether the man would feel mocked if she laughed too hard.

"Alright, well ... good luck," she said.

"Thanks again."

Willow didn't move; something was keeping her stationary. She stared at the blind stranger for a silent moment. Her eyes scanned both ends of the platform. She and the stranger were still alone. Should she try it? What could it hurt? Then again, what if the man got agitated with her? Sure, it's crazy, but if it worked... Oh, but it couldn't work, could it? She realized if she was going to do it, she'd better stop wasting time.

Willow held out her index finger. Her hand began to tremble. She was almost there. She motioned very slowly, her heart racing. She was a few inches away from reaching the man's right hand. She would touch the top part of it for one second and she'd have her answer.

*This is it.*

She was just about to make contact when—

“I can see you, ya know.”

Willow retracted her hand so quickly, she almost lost her balance from the force.

“Huh?”

“I can see you,” repeated the stranger, finally turning his head to face Willow. “Not the way in which you can see, but I can ... sense you.”

Willow was dumbfounded.

“I may be blind, but I’ve been this way for eight years now and I know when someone’s staring at me. I can hear their breathing, feel their body heat, smell their conditioner... Plus the fact that I didn’t hear you walk away, I figured you were gawking.”

Willow went red. If the man could see her, he would notice just how embarrassed she truly was by the rosy hue that coated her entire face.

“I—I’m sorry. I didn’t mean ... I was just—”

“Oh, don’t give it another thought,” replied the stranger, his tone placid. “I get it all the time. People are just curious. Who can blame ‘em? You notice this guy who can’t see a thing and your mind is flooded with questions: ‘How did it happen?’ ‘How does he get around?’ And, I just know this one always pops into

people's heads: 'How does he go to the bathroom?'" The stranger laughed at his own words, shaking his head.

"Right ... I was just wondering how ... how you accomplish certain everyday tasks," Willow lied.

"He'd be lost without me," said a voice from behind Willow. She turned around to see a tall, fit Asian man in his mid thirties walk right past her to greet the man sitting on the bench.

"Sorry, I'm late," he said, grabbing the blind man's hand to shake it. "The traffic on Tomack Highway at this time..."

"No worries, I was just chatting with my new friend here," said the blind stranger as he stood up. "Charles, this is Miss—" he leaned in towards Willow to urge a response.

"Oh - Willow. My name's Willow."

"Willow..." the blind stranger repeated, appearing to stare off into the distance, "...such a peaceful name." He turned back to face her. "Before we part, Miss Willow, I'd like to briefly answer your question if I may?"

Willow couldn't tell the stranger that he did not know the *real* question she wanted an answer to, so she just went with, "Oh, that would be great."

"How do I accomplish everyday tasks? It's quite simple, really. You see, I must rely on intuition; I allow my instincts to carry me through my day. If I relied on logical thought, all I would have are a ton of questions of my own; I would doubt myself at every turn."

Willow was now hanging on the man's every word; he seemed fascinating. She even nodded in agreement and then realized it was pointless. As if sensing Willow's nod, the stranger continued.

"Being blind, I need to rely on my other senses. That is the key word here, Miss Willow – *senses*. I do what I feel, not what I think. If my mind tells me something will be difficult or time consuming, I just ignore it and go with what my gut tells me. That is the best way for me to describe it; intuitive feeling over logical thought. I hope that makes sense to you, Miss Willow."

"Actually, it does," replied Willow, her expression and tone pensive.

"Well, I think I've taken up enough of your time, Miss Willow."

The blind stranger bent down to pick up his bag and Willow saw his Asian friend make a *talks-a-lot* gesture with his hand, miming an invisible puppet. Willow smiled. Then, something happened that made Willow's heart sprint once again.

"It was a pleasure meeting you, Miss Willow." The blind stranger smiled as he offered his right hand to his new acquaintance.

Willow hesitated for a moment out of the sheer shock of what could happen. She gently took hold of the stranger's hand and shook it.

"Pleasure meeting you too," she said, her throat tightening.

The man released Willow's hand, smiled one final time, grabbed his belongings and turned to walk away. Willow watched him with deep concentration, searching for any signs of change in his behavior.

The blind stranger's friend gave Willow a wave. She waved back and quickly threw her gaze back to the man with the metal cane.

As she watched them make their way toward the west-side staircase, Willow was careful not to blink. Just as they reached the steps, about 20 yards away, Willow

noticed the blind man grab his friend's arm, forcing him to a halt. Willow grew more anxious. She could tell the men were speaking, but she couldn't make out their words. She watched them intently as the man with the cane removed his glasses. Her heart had reached her throat. Suddenly, both men turned and appeared to be staring at Willow, neither of them muttering a single word as their stare locked onto Willow's distant silhouette. Although the Fall breeze was accompanied by a slight chill in the air, sweat began to form on Willow's brow.

"Helloooo?" a frustrated voice called from behind Willow, startling her. She turned around to meet Razzel's reproving stare.

"You were supposed to meet me at the bottom of the east-side staircase," exclaimed Razzel. "I saw the train pull out almost 10 minutes ago!"

"Sorry, Raz," said Willow, "I was just—" she turned around to find that the two men had vanished from sight.

"Are you okay? You're looking paler than usual."

"I'm fine. I was just trying to ... figure something out."

Willow and Razzel walked across the highway and down two blocks to the local library. They immediately began researching books on their assignment. When Razzel wasn't looking, Willow searched for books on healing, but all she could come up with was two books on herbal home remedies. She was about to log onto one of the computers to search the internet when Razzel began complaining about being bored. They handed some books to the check-out clerk in order to work on their papers at home. They still had a week before their assignment was due and the public library was not one of Razzel's favorite hang-out spots.

The two girls headed back to Razzel's house and, as promised, a plate full of chocolate chip, double-fudge brownies was waiting for them on the kitchen table with a note from Mrs. Fiora.

"Mom says, 'Hi'," Razzel relayed to Willow, crumpling up the note and tossing it into the trash. "She and dad went to afternoon mass. Funny ... they haven't gone to church in years – unless you count Christmas and Easter."

"Really?"

“Yeah, we used to go every Sunday when I was younger, but once Dad opened up the business, he was either too busy or too tired. Me and Mom went by ourselves for a while but then little by little... We just go to the holiday masses now.”

“Ah,” said Willow, “you’re one of *those* people, huh?”

“If by ‘one of *those* people’, you’re referring to people who only attend church on religious holidays, where mass is most crowded, thereby taking seats away from people that go every week, forcing them to stand for over an hour because holiday masses run longer, then, yeah ... I’m ‘one of *those* people.’”

Willow burst out laughing and almost spit out the brownie she had just bitten.

“We still go every week,” she said, wiping her mouth with a napkin. “I don’t mind it, but to tell you the truth, I don’t really get much out of it. Ever since Dad died, I stopped believing in miracles. Whenever the priest talks about them, my mind says—”

“—what evs,” Razzel finished Willow’s sentence in her own Razzel-like fashion.

“Pretty much,” replied Willow.

“Well, I’m just glad they didn’t drag me with them today,” said Razzel. “You know ... my mom’s been acting weird lately. Last night, in the car, she said something about how ‘not all answers to life can be found in a library book.’ Something about ‘spiritual answers.’ Something like that. I was half asleep and when she goes all *philosophy major* on me, it’s all I can do to not completely doze off.”

Something Razzel had said, or rather something Razzel’s mother had said, seemed to ignite something inside Willow’s mind; she realized she needed to stop racking her brain about the strange occurrences in her life and speak with someone about them; someone familiar with what she was going through. There was only one place to go.

“Hey, Raz, I’d better get going. I promised my mom I’d spend some quality time with her on her day off and it’s already...” – Willow checked her watch – “...almost 4 o’clock.”

“What? I thought we could catch a flick, you’d stay for dinner and then maybe spend some time on this stinkin’ paper.”

“I’d love to, Raz, but time with Mom is hard to come by these days with her crazy schedule.”

“I hear ya. Do what you gotta do. I promised some people from my Jiu-Jitsu class I’d try to stop by for some extra training this weekend anyway.”

“Try not to break anyone’s limbs, will ya.”

“No promises.”

Willow laughed.

“Tell your mom I love the brownies,” she said, wrapping one in a napkin and shoving it into her jacket pocket to give to Wyatt.

“Want me to walk you to the train?” offered Razzel.

“Thanks, I’ll be fine.”

Willow took the train back to her stop and walked eight blocks in the opposite direction of her home until she reached her destination. She walked up the short staircase leading to the church rectory and anxiously rang the doorbell. After what seemed like an eternity, she was buzzed in. The rectory was just as Willow had pictured it – quiet. Only one person sat behind a small desk and Willow was surprised to see it was a young girl who must have been around Wyatt’s age.

“Help you?” said the unenthused, gum-chewing teen behind the desk.

“Yes, I’d like to speak to a priest, any priest in the parish, please.”

“Well, the only one here right now is Father Strauburn, but he usually doesn’t see anyone without an appointment. Plus, the rectory is closing in five minutes.”

“Oh, okay. I guess I’ll make an appointment then.”

The girl behind the desk pulled out a large binder and Willow could swear she saw her roll her eyes as she opened it. The girl flipped through the binder filled with appointments and parish events.

“Let’s see ... the earliest I can give you is ... next Thursday at one o’clock.”

“Oh, I’ll be in school during that time. Is he free any evenings?”

The girl let out a sigh.

“Evenings are his busiest time,” she explained, her tone slightly irritated. “Since he’s the pastor, he needs to—”

A door opened up to Willow’s left and she immediately recognized Father Strauburn. She was surprised to

see him out of his robes, wearing jeans and sneakers, although he still wore his Roman collar. He approached the girl sitting behind the desk.

“Charlene, can you be a dear and file these for me when you get a chance?” he said, handing her a stack of papers. “No rush.”

Willow could tell by the girl’s expression, she had no intention of rushing.

Father Strauburn turned his attention to Willow.

“Hello,” he said with an inviting smile. “Are you one of Charlene’s friends?”

“No, Father. Actually, I came here to speak with *you*. I was just trying to get an appointment, but—”

“Appointment?” said Father Strauburn, looking at Willow as if she had just sprouted a second head. “Nonsense! I always have time for a parishioner. Please, step into my office.”

Willow followed the priest. Just before entering his office, she chanced a glance back at Charlene behind her desk and noticed that she was glaring at Willow in disgust, as if Willow had just broken some sacred rule.

Father Strauburn closed his office door behind them.

“Please ... sit. You’ll have to excuse Charlene. She’s only here for school credit and it seems we are torturing her by having her sit behind a desk and do absolutely nothing for four hours a week.”

Willow smiled at Father Strauburn’s sarcasm. She never heard a trace of it during his homilies. She watched him as he took his seat behind his desk. His office was small, yet inviting. He pushed a bowl filled with wrapped mints towards her.

“Please, take a few,” he said. “I love them, which is why I’m trying to get rid of them; I need to shed a few pounds before all of the holiday cookies begin funneling through here.”

Willow grabbed a handful of mints and shoved them into her left jacket pocket, remembering her right pocket was housing a large brownie.

“Thanks.”

“So, my child,” Father Strauburn addressed Willow, placing both elbows on his desk, interlocking his fingers, “how may I assist you?”

Willow wasn’t certain where to begin. She didn’t know if she should just blurt out her theory, ask vague

questions, or take the *"I have a friend who wants to know"* route.

"Well, Father ... I'm confused about something ... you see ... I just..." Willow shifted nervously in her seat.

"Whatever you tell me will be held in the strictest confidence," assured Father Strauburn, sensing Willow's apprehension had something to do with concealing a secret.

Willow suddenly took notice of Father Strauburn's right thumb; it was swollen with a blackened nail. The priest realized what Willow's eyes had locked onto.

"Oh, don't worry about me," he said. "I was nailing my niece's tree-house and she distracted me. I just took the bandage off today to let my finger breathe a bit..." —he motioned to an ace bandage on his desk— "...I hate wearing it. So, you were saying?"

Willow's eyes were transfixed on the injured thumb. She appeared to be in deep contemplation, as if trying to work out a mathematical formula. Father Strauburn held up his hand and began to wiggle his bruised thumb side-to-side in front of his curious guest.

"Really, it's fine," he assured her. "I can't bend it all the way yet, but at least it's not broken. It should be

back to normal in a week or so. I can be a bit of a klutz whenever I'm around any tools, so it's safer if—"

Father Strauburn was suddenly interrupted by Willow leaning across his desk and gently grasping his injured finger, covering it entirely with her own hand. She decided it would be a lot faster than a long, drawn-out theory. And if she was wrong, she needn't waste another moment of her or Father Strauburn's time.

Father Strauburn looked at her curiously. Willow withdrew her hand and sat back into her seat. Father Strauburn never took his eyes off of her.

"Yes, well, you see then that it doesn't hurt much, although if you squeezed it—" He could not continue as he suddenly noticed his perfect thumb, the thumb which moments ago was bruised, sore and swollen from injury. He bent it forward, to his astonishment, as far as he could before he had injured it. He looked up at Willow who gave him a nervous grin and a small shrug.

"Yes ... well ... I see. I see what has led you here. This situation is unlike any I have ever ... well, it is quite—"

"Confusing," interjected Willow. "I just wish I knew *why* this happened to me. What makes *me* so special?"

I'm just a kid who wants to get through her adolescence with minimal humiliation."

The priest, although listening to his guest, was still transfixed by his healed appendage. He began whispering to himself as if no one else was in his presence.

"I've never experienced anything like—"

Father Strauburn shook his head quickly and turned his attention back to the curious young girl before him. He surveyed Willow for a moment before addressing her.

"Yes, well, I think ... I think perhaps you are asking yourself the wrong question, my child," he said, leaning forward, interlocking his fingers once again, stealing one final glance at his suddenly flawless thumb.

"The wrong question, Father?" repeated Willow.

"Yes, my dear. I fear that you have come here seeking answers, which are not within my power to provide. You are probably expecting me to theorize that you have been chosen by our Lord to be a messenger, that you are a some sort of prophet ... a saint ... or perhaps even an angel, cloaked within human form..."

Willow stared into Father Strauburn's eyes, trying not to blink for fear she would miss something.

“However,” the priest continued, “I will not indulge upon any speculation on what may have caused the circumstances which surround your ... unusual ability.”

Willow’s heart sank. Didn’t anyone have an explanation for the strange occurrences she was experiencing?

“What I *can* tell you, however, is that you have been given a gift. This gift may be considered a blessing ... or a burden. This is something only you can decipher for yourself, my child.”

Willow’s frustration was mounting. She needed clear, concise answers. Why was he speaking in riddles?

Father Strauburn could see, by Willow’s puzzled expression, he wasn’t quite getting through to her.

“My child, I will repeat what I said moments earlier. You are asking yourself the wrong question. It does not matter *why* you were given this ability. You are asking yourself ‘*why*’ when you should be asking yourself ‘*what?*’”

Willow continued to stare blankly at the priest across the desk, hoping there was more to his sermon. After what seemed to Willow like ages, but was only a few seconds, Father Strauburn continued.

“It is not important *why* this happened. The question is: *What* are you going to do with it? Again, this is a question to be answered only by the bearer of the gift.”

Willow was finally beginning to understand. She had been so busy harping on *how* and *why* this happened to her, she never stopped to think about all of the good she could do with it. She was over-analyzing, as usual.

Whether it was due to the fact that Willow knew for certain she was not going crazy, or the relief she felt in revealing her secret to someone, or even the great sense of purpose she now felt, a feeling of elation flooded her. She gave her advisor an enlightened smile and a nod.

“Thanks so much for your time, Father. I know how busy you are,” she said, standing up from her seat, offering a handshake.

Father Strauburn stood up and grabbed Willow’s hand firmly.

“I find myself a fairly good judge of character, young lady; I needn’t bother losing sleep about you once you leave here.”

“What makes you so sure?” asked Willow, releasing the priest’s hand.

“Because if you were the type of person I needed to worry about ... you wouldn't be here.”

## Chapter Six Mr. Krattlebrank



When Willow arrived home that evening, she expected to find her mother preparing dinner in the kitchen. The scent of food was in the air, but Willow wasn't certain what it was. She walked into the kitchen to find Wyatt and Krebs eating out of take-out cartons and metal trays.

"Squirt!" said Wyatt, his mouth packed with food.

"Greetings, Krimble sibling," said Krebs, shoving half of a burrito into his face

"Hey, guys. Where's Mom?"

"Paged by the hospital..." replied Wyatt, slurping noodles, "...two nurses called in sick ... had to fill in ... left money for take-out. Grab a plate."

"I'm not really hungry," said Willow, staring at what looked like two Neanderthals feasting over a fresh kill.

"So, Mom's at the hospital right now?"

"She's been there for two hours already," said Wyatt, lo mein dangling from his chin.

“Hmm...” Willow began thinking about all of the sick and injured patients lying in their hospital beds. “You know, maybe *Mom* would like some food.”

“Are you listening, Squirt? She’s not here.”

“I get it, big brother, but maybe I can bring her some food at work. Looks like you ordered enough for 10 people.”

“Or enough for two hulking athletes,” said Wyatt, licking the fingers on his right hand from the sparerib he just devoured while fist-pumping *Kreb* with his left.

Willow shook her head as she began filling up an empty carton for her mother.

“Guess I’m taking the bus today after all.”

It was 6:55pm when Willow arrived at Stratlin Medical. Visiting hours were over at 7pm, but Maurice, the security guard, recognized Willow and let her in.

“Know where the elevators are, do you?”

Willow nodded with a smile and headed to the elevator bank.

Upon arriving on the 2nd floor, Willow made her way to the nurses’ station, which usually housed at

least one nurse behind the desk. Willow was surprised to find it empty.

Mrs. Krimble had just rounded the corner from the opposite end of the hallway when she spotted her daughter.

“What are you doing here, Sweetheart?”

“I just wanted to bring you some dinner. Wyatt ordered take-out.”

“Ooh – *House Of Bamboozal?*”

“Nah. Like I said, Wyatt ordered – *Zen Loco’s.*”

“Leave it to your brother to find the only Chinese/Mexican restaurant on the island. Thanks, baby.” Mrs. Krimble took the bag of food and sniffed it. “Mmmm, I’m starving, but it’ll have to wait. We’re so short-staffed tonight and I’m crazed.”

“Oh, I’ll get out of your way then.”

“Willow, you are never in my way. Just give me 15 minutes to check on Mr. Krattlebrank in 258. He buzzes me every five minutes, claiming there are bats in his room. It takes me another 10 minutes to convince him they’re only fruit bats that aren’t interested in his blood, because it’s easier than convincing him there’s nothing

there. Oh, and he keeps on calling me *Alice*. So sad – early stages of Alzheimer’s.

“His daughter was supposed to spend the night and see him into his wrist surgery in the morning, but she had an emergency with her son and...” – Mrs. Krimble ran her fingers through both sides of her hair as if to squeeze her own head – “...this is shaping up to be quite a night.”

Willow spotted a large woman wearing a uniform similar to her mother’s, shuffling down the hall toward them.

“Samantha, did you give Mrs. Stigler her pain medication?” the woman asked, checking her clipboard, not bothering to look up at either Willow or Mrs. Krimble.

Mrs. Krimble checked her watch.

“On my way, Gladys. I’ll be right back, Willow. Just wait here by the desk.”

“Take your time, Mom.”

Willow watched as her mother ran down the hall and made a sharp right while the woman, who Willow assumed was her mother’s supervisor, stormed off in the opposite direction, never dislodging her gaze from her clipboard.

Willow suddenly found herself alone in the hallway. She could hear the sounds of several television sets playing in various rooms. An orderly appeared suddenly out of room 293. He gave Willow a quick smile, then dashed down the hall to his next task.

Suddenly, a number flashed in Willow's mind: 258. That was the room her mother said Mr. Krattlebrank was in.

*What did she say he had? Alzheimer's?* Willow tried casting her nerves aside.

*Just go. Patients get visitors all the time.*

Willow followed the numbers down the hall ... 292, 291. *This is the right way ... 288 ... must be through these doors ... 261 ... here it is – 258.*

Willow walked into the room and knew at once the patient before her, out of bed and in his hospital gown, had to be Mr. Krattlebrank. He was a short, thin, balding old man with bandages around his left wrist. Whatever few hairs he had left on his head were disheveled, as if a huge gust of wind had just blown through the room. His television was tuned to a game show, but his attention was focused on the ceiling, or so it appeared to Willow.

It only took a few seconds for the old man to realize he had an unexpected visitor.

“‘Bout time, Alice!” the patient barked. “There’s more of ‘em now ... bats – bats everywhere!” He quickly ducked down, as if dodging something. “Afta my blood, but I keep tellin’ ‘em I ain’t got much left.” He ducked down once again.

Willow approached the old man cautiously, staring up at the ceiling.

“But there are so many of them,” she said. “Maybe we can offer them something else so they’ll leave you alone.”

“Blood! They wants blood! Ain’t got none ta give!”

There was another ducking motion followed by a grunt.

Willow reached into her pocket and pulled out the mints Father Strauburn had given her.

“Well, I have something better than blood. Look, I’ve got ... quipple seeds,” Willow said in a whisper.

Mr. Krattlebrank halted his bat-dodging for the moment.

“Watcha got?”

“Quipple seeds. Oh, surely you’ve heard of quipple seeds,” said Willow, holding out her hand, displaying the mints.

“‘Course I hearda ‘em... Whadda dey do again?”

“Well,” Willow continued, in a whisper, “bats love ‘em, more than anyone’s blood. But what they don’t realize until it’s too late...” – Willow motioned for Mr. Krattlebrank to come closer; he cautiously obeyed – “... as soon as they eat them,” Willow whispered even more softly, “their wings freeze up and they fall to the ground, petrified.”

“Yeah?”

“And – oh this is the best part – their teeth fall out.”

“HEH! I know what dats like!” Mr. Krattlebrank smiled, displaying a total of seven teeth, pointing to his dentures on the stand next to his bed.

“Okay, here’s what we’ll do,” Willow instructed, “on the count of three, I’m going to throw the quipple seeds into the air and then we have to take cover. We don’t want any bats crashing down on us once they freeze up.”

“Dem bats is in fer it. Yer a genius, Alice. A genius, ya hear?”

“As soon as I count to three, you run into bed, get under those covers and don’t come out ‘til I give you the all-clear.”

“Ooh Dem bats is gonna be sorry dey evah messed wit Cecil S. Krattlebrank.”

“Okay, ready? One, two...” Willow counted, watching Mr. Krattlebrank rub his hands together in a scheming fashion “...THREE!” She threw the mints into the air.

Mr. Krattlebrank let out a squeal of delight as he darted for his bed. He threw the covers up over his head, mistaking the sounds of landing mints for crashing bats. Willow heard faint muttering coming from beneath the sheets, “Bats is gonna pay, but good. Heh, heh.”

After a few moments of Willow listening to Mr. Krattlebrank’s muffled commentary, she cautiously approached his bed and sat down beside him.

“Okay, Mr. Krattlebrank, all clear. The bats are all grounded. You can come out now.”

Like a child playing hide-and-seek, Mr. Krattlebrank flung the covers off of his head and bolted upright. He immediately threw his gaze to the floor.

“Look at ‘em all ... lyin’ there,” he said, pointing to the floor, giggling. “I told ya Alice would fix yas,” he mocked before turning to Willow. “We did it, Alice ... we got ‘em.”

“Yes ... we got ‘em,” said Willow, offering a slightly trembling hand to Mr. Krattlebrank.

The old man stared at Willow for a moment. He glanced at her hand, then glared into her eyes, shifting his gaze back to her hand, then her eyes once more...

“Yer not Alice!” He tore his covers off entirely and slid out of bed.

“Where’s Alice? Whataya done wit ‘er?”

“Mr. Krattlebrank, please, I just —”

“Ya thought ya could fool ol’ Cecil, eh? Not today!”

Mr. Krattlebrank shuffled toward the door and poked his head out.

“Security! Police!” he shouted. “We got an imposta here. Help! Someone help da old man!”

“Please, Mr. Krattlebrank, I was just trying to —”

Willow heard the squeaks of rubber soles getting closer and closer. She began to panic. Uncertain of her next move, she ran into the connecting bathroom and

closed the door behind her just in time to hear a familiar voice.

“Mr. Krattlebrank...” said Mrs. Krimble, breathing heavily from her sprint, “...I thought I told you, those bats are not—”

“Feget dem bats. We got bigga fish now!”

“What is it now, Mr. Krattlebrank?” asked Mrs. Krimble, exasperated.

“There’s a spy in dis here room. She’s hidin’ in the crappa.”

Mrs. Krimble suppressed a chuckle.

“Really now?”

“Yeah! We gots to shackle ‘er, but good, Alice. Get out them shackles!”

Mrs. Krimble gently grabbed Mr. Krattlebrank by his right arm and led him back to his bed.

“Alright, Cecil, how about you get back into bed and get some rest while I check your bathroom.”

Mr. Krattlebrank cautiously walked back to his bed, stepping over, what he perceived to be, petrified bats. Mrs. Krimble glared at him curiously.

Mrs. Krimble tucked Mr. Krattlebrank under his sheets and assured him that she would search the bathroom on her way out. She opened the bathroom door and poked her head into the darkness, as Willow hid behind the door, holding her breath.

“Your spy seems to have climbed out the window, Mr. Krattlebrank. I’d better go and alert security.” Mrs. Krimble smirked at her own tall tale.

“Make sure dey use them big guns on dis one, Alice.”

“Of course; what else would they use? Now, close your eyes and get some rest ... you’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

Mr. Krattlebrank closed his eyes and continued mumbling to himself. Mrs. Krimble turned off the television set and flipped off the light switch as the sounds of her patient’s mutters serenaded her exit, “... bats ... spies ... security ... guns – big guns...”

Willow waited until her mother’s footsteps died away. She slowly opened the bathroom door and tiptoed out into the room toward the patient’s bed. She suddenly found herself looking down at Mr. Krattlebrank. His muttering had transformed into loud snores. The room was dark, the only light seeping in from the

hallway and the tall street lamp shining through the blinds.

Willow grabbed the old man's left hand, gently grasping his fingertips. As she continued to gaze down at him, she found herself repeating the last thing she heard her mother say: "Get some rest, Mr. Krattlebrank ... you've got a big day tomorrow."

The following morning, Willow was eating breakfast when her mother arrived from her shift, through the back door, looking exhausted.

"Gladys owes me big-time for last night," said Mrs. Krimble, throwing her car keys onto the counter, collapsing into a chair next to Willow. "Honey, do you mind taking the bus this morning? I've got to get some sleep before my afternoon shift."

"No problem, Mom. You know I don't mind taking the bus to school. The stop is only two blocks away."

"I know, but I cherish those extra minutes where I actually get to see you and—" Mrs. Krimble tilted her head sideways to peak into her living room, spotting a vacant couch, "—TV's not on which can only mean one thing..."

“I told him to get up, but he just grunted something about being ‘tired from too much practice.’ He rolled over and went back to sleep.”

“WYATT!” bellowed Mrs. Krimble. “GET DOWN HERE – NOW! YOUR BUS LEAVES IN 25 MINUTES!”

Willow and Mrs. Krimble heard the bathroom door slam shut, signifying that the man of the house had finally awoken.

“So, what happened last night?”

“What do you mean?” replied Willow, facing her bowl of cornflakes.

“I came back to the desk, but you were gone.”

“Oh ... I just realized how busy and short-staffed you were, so I figured I would leave you to it.”

“Well, I’ll be honest, I really *was* crazed. Buzzed by someone new every ten minutes. You know I love what I do, but I can’t be the only one doing it; I only have two hands. And just before my shift ended, one of my patients, who was scheduled for wrist surgery, was ranting and raving how he didn’t need the operation, how ‘his wrist never felt better’, insisting on new X-Rays.”

Willow would not look at her mother for fear of revealing something about the previous evening's excursion.

"Why would he say those things?" she asked.

"Well, he has Alzheimer's and he tends to get delusional. Last night he claimed there was a spy in his bathroom. This was after the bats flew all around his room. Anyway, his daughter showed up at 5am and said that her father seemed different; these weren't his usual rantings and she begged us for new X-rays. It was really crazy, but the new tests showed that his arthritis was gone. Dr. Flirsten had no explanation for it. He also said that Mr. Krattlebrank (Willow dropped her spoon in her bowl at the name) seemed different this morning. He was much easier to reason with and his ramblings had ceased. They're performing more tests today before they release him. What a night ... what a morning!"

Willow pensively placed her bowl in the sink as she heard Wyatt shuffle down the stairs and crumple onto the sofa.

"No you don't, Mister!" said Mrs. Krimble from her kitchen chair. "Eat something and get to walkin'."

Wyatt grumbled something incoherent as he shuffled into the kitchen. Willow placed a clean bowl and a box of *Cinnamon Pucks* in front of him.

“Hey, Mom,” she said, “since we haven’t spent much time together, maybe I could come by the hospital again this afternoon.”

The school day seemed to pass uneventfully. Aside from some muttering in the hallways between classes as people stopped to catch a glimpse of “the girl who wiped-out on stage,” the day was more tolerable than Willow and Razzel had imagined. This was due, in part, to the fact that Shayla and Snella seemed too busy organizing the yearbook layout, or rather, delegating to others, that they weren’t even in all of their classes. “Great. They get to boss everyone around and take credit for everything while we’re stuck doing geometry!” Razzel protested.

Willow found it difficult to concentrate even in her favorite classes. As soon as the final bell sounded, Willow cleared out her locker and ran for the bus.

She explained to Razzel that she had to hurry and catch the C-2 bus, which would drop her off two blocks away from Stratlin Medical.

Willow arrived at the hospital at 3:22pm and hastily made her way to the elevator bank. It wasn't until she stepped into the elevator that she realized she had no idea what her next move should be. Should she ask her mother who the sickest patients were and sneak into their rooms, hoping no one else was visiting them? Should she check other floors and wings of the hospital that her mother wasn't covering?

As the elevator doors opened on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, Willow's mind raced with uncertainty.

*This is crazy ... now what?*

She found herself walking toward the nurses' station when she saw a young woman in her 30's, wheeling an old man in a wheelchair, who looked awfully familiar. They were accompanied by a middle-aged man wearing a white lab coat. They stopped right in front of the nurses' station at the same moment Willow had reached it. There was a young Indian Nurse behind the desk who spotted Willow.

“Hi there,” said the nurse, smiling at Willow while stapling paperwork. “You’re Samantha’s youngest, aren’t you? We met at last year’s holiday party at The Lamppost Lounge.”

“Oh, right, hello ... Nurse Tilak,” replied Willow, quickly reading the nametag on the nurse’s uniform. “Have you seen my mom?” Even as Willow was asking her question, she was trying to listen in on the conversation taking place not more than two feet away from her. She could hear something about “*test results.*”

“She just went to check on a patient,” replied Nurse Tilak. “She should be back in a few minutes. You can come back behind the desk and take a seat if you like.”

Willow appreciated the gesture, but remained rooted to her spot.

“Oh, no thanks. I’ll just hang out here and wait for her.”

“No problem,” said Nurse Tilak, with another smile, turning around to file her paperwork.

Willow tried shuffling sideways to get closer to the trio she was eavesdropping on.

She could hear the Doctor more clearly now: "I keep telling your father I want him back in for some neuropsychological testing, but, of course, I can not force him. I'm very happy with his physical test results, but this sort of thing does not disappear and I want to study—"

"I ain't no lab rat, Doc! I told ya, I've nevva felt betta in my life, and I don't need this stinkin' wheelchair!"

"Now, Mr. Krattlebrank, I don't know what happened with your wrist and I am in contact with your family physician to see what went awry with his original diagnosis, but I assure you that your ... other condition—"

"I aint got that stinkin' brain disease you keep talkin' about!" Mr. Krattlebrank barked. "Sure, I don't rememba much on how I even got ta dis place, but I'm tellin' ya, I feel great!" Mr. Krattlebrank turned to the young girl beside him. "Sign me out and let's get goin'. Dey bin pokin' and prodin' me fer hours."

The woman, who Willow now understood to be the old man's daughter, turned to the doctor.

"Thanks for everything, Doctor Flirsten, but I'll take it from here. I'll keep an eye on him at home and take notes on his behavior."

“Very well, Mrs. Tartris,” said Dr. Flirsten, exasperated. “I’ll just sign your paperwork and you can take your father home.”

“‘Bout freakin’ time,” the old man growled.

Willow slowly turned to the patient and his daughter, who was now kneeling before her father, to chance a look at them.

“You really do seem more like your old self, Pop.”

“‘Course! Who else would I be like?” At that moment, Mr. Krattlebrank looked over his daughter’s shoulder and met Willow’s gaze. She quickly turned away.

“Hey ... hey you!” the old man grumbled, as his daughter turned around and stood up to investigate her father’s beckon.

Willow pretended not to hear him.

“Little, lady!” Mr. Krattlebrank continued to summon.

Willow realized she needed to respond; she couldn’t continue pretending she didn’t hear the loud calls. She turned around slowly to address the old man in the wheelchair.

“Are you talking to me?” Willow tried to sound as surprised as possible.

“Course I’m talkin’ ta you. Anyone else standin’ ova there?”

“Pop, don’t be rude,” said the old man’s daughter.

“A’right, a’right. I just wanted ta ask this lovely little lady where I seen her before, s’all.”

Willow swallowed hard.

“I don’t believe we’ve ever met before, sir.”

Mr. Krattlebrank visually surveyed Willow for a moment until an enlightened smile suddenly stretched across his face.

“I know where I seen ya...” he said, showing off his dentures, “...you was in my room last night, wasn’tcha?”

“What ... no ... I couldn’t have, I—”

“I’m sorry,” said the old man’s daughter, “Pop is sick and he—”

“I ain’t sick, damn it!” snapped Mr. Krattlebrank. “And I know *you* (he pointed to Willow) was in my room last night, in a dream I had.”

Mr. Krattlebrank’s daughter gave Willow a flustered look.

“Pop, I think we should just—”

“I dreamed I was being attacked by somethin’. Can’t rememba what exactly...” –the old man scratched his head–“...then *you* showed up and you helped me. Yeah; that much I rememba.” Mr. Krattlebrank looked down toward the floor for a moment and squinted his eyes as if he was trying to recall something. He rummaged through his mind for what seemed to be a distant memory.

“I was lost somewhere; lost fer a long time. Things was chasin’ me and ... and then...” –he looked up and met Willow’s eyes–“... then *you* came in and ... made them all go away. You ... you took hold’a my hand and ... showed me da way back so’s I wasn’t lost no more.”

Willow could see Mr. Krattlebrank’s bottom lip begin to quiver. His daughter looked at him anxiously. She knelt down by his side once more.

“Pop, are you alright?”

Mr. Krattlebrank looked into his daughter’s eyes and nodded. As a tear streaked down his creased cheek, he gave her a broad smile.

“I’m betta than alright ... I’m back.”

Willow wasn't certain how to respond; she couldn't admit to anything, but she didn't want to continue denying Mr. Krattebrank's account for fear that his daughter would think he was delusional. She opted to simply remain in her spot, taking in the scene of a daughter comforting her father.

The moment was suddenly extinguished by a voice from behind the desk.

"Alright, Mrs. Tartris," said Dr. Flirsten, "if you can just sign your full name here..."

The old man's daughter stood up and signed her name on the slip presented to her. Dr. Flirsten collected it back from her for examination.

"*Alice?*" he said with a smile. "*Alice Tartris? Alice is also my daughter's name. Look at that, Mr. Krattlebrank...*" Dr. Flirsten addressed his patient as if he were five years old, "...you and I have something in common."

Mr. Krattlebrank ignored this statement, as he focused once again on Willow. His daughter thanked Dr. Flirsten one final time as he reminded her that her father's "condition" would cause his memory to come

and go. Mr. Krattlebrank could hear Dr. Flirsten, but continued to ignore him.

As Mr. Krattlebrank's daughter began to wheel him away from the desk, he reached out and grabbed Willow's wrist, forcing his daughter to stop.

"Dad, we really should leave this girl alone, you—"

"Ya don't suppose I'm a wacko, do ya, kid?" the old man asked Willow.

Willow glared at him for moment. She wanted to tell him that he certainly was not "wacko"; that he was healed; that he needn't bother returning to the hospital for further testing, but she knew these words were not an option. She knelt down beside her former patient's wheelchair and lay her hand on top of his. She looked him straight in his moist eyes as she chose her words carefully:

"I would bet that you're just as sane as I am." She leaned in closer and lowered her voice to a whisper, "Maybe everyone else around here is wacko."

The old man smiled. Willow looked up at his daughter.

"But it looks like you're in pretty good hands."

Mr. Krattlebrank glanced at his daughter and let out a chuckle. He then turned his gaze back to Willow.

“Ya got that right, kiddo.” He tapped Willow on the top of her hand three times as if saying goodbye to an old friend, and then slowly retracted both his hands as Willow stood back up.

Mr. Krattlebrank’s daughter began to wheel her father toward the elevator. Willow noticed her mouth the words “*thank you*” to her as she rounded the corner. Willow nodded in return.

“What was *that* all about?” asked Mrs. Krimble who had been standing there for an indefinite amount of time.

Willow turned to her mother.

“Just saying goodbye to a new friend.”

Dr. Flirsten was still standing behind the desk, jotting something on his clipboard.

“Poor guy...” he said, shaking his head, “...carrying on about being chased by creatures and then being saved in his dreams by a complete stranger. Only going to get worse.”

Willow was frustrated by Dr. Flirsten's pessimism. Sure, he didn't know the truth about what really happened, but did he have to be so cold and negative about it?

"Oh, I don't know," said Willow, "I think he might be just fine."

Dr. Flirsten suddenly crossed his arms across his clipboard.

"Oh, and how many years of medical training have you had, young lady?" he said, condescendingly.

Willow turned red.

"I ... just have a feeling—"

"Oh, a feeling. Well ... I guess the next time I need to diagnose a patient, there's no need to perform any medical examinations; I can just ask *you* what you're feeling. Then, *you* can give my patients false hope with your unprofessional, inexperienced prognosis!"

Willow was taken aback and did not quite know how to respond. Mrs. Krimble was furious. She opened her mouth to speak, but thought better of it. After another moment of awkward silence, Dr. Flirsten stormed away, mumbling to himself, "A feeling..."

Mrs. Krimble turned to her daughter.

"I'm so sorry, Willow. He can be a real jerk, but the last nurse that got on his bad side is on permanent night shift and I—"

"It's okay, Mom — forget it."

"One of these days, I just might risk having to work the night shift," chimed Nurse Tilak from behind the desk. "I'd like to slap that arrogance right outta him."

Willow and her mother both laughed.

"You're actually right on time for my break, Willow," said Mrs. Krimble. "Come on, I'll buy you a cup of tea. Want anything, Reena?"

"Ooh, yeah, bring me down some of those cider doughnuts," replied Nurse Tilak. "The powdered kind."

"You got it. Come *this* way, Willow; we can take the staff elevator."

Willow and her mother needed to take the elevator up three flights to the 5<sup>th</sup> floor cafeteria. When the elevator stopped on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, a male and female nurse were waiting with their patient in a mobile bed.

"Afternoon, Samantha," said the male nurse.

"How are you Scott ... Christa?" Mrs. Krimble addressed her colleagues.

The nurses wheeled their patient onto the elevator. Willow looked at the bed and saw a teenage boy, blankets up to his neck, an oxygen mask over his mouth and some sort of monitoring mechanism attached to him.

“Movin’ Freddy here to ICU,” said the male nurse. “Just got outta surgery ... really bad skateboarding accident ... chest and ribs were in bad shape ... doctors pulled bone fragments out of his ... oh you don’t need to hear about that. Parents are a real mess ... won’t know anything for sure for a while, but it’ll take a mira – oh, I’m sorry,” the rambling nurse finally spotted Willow in the corner behind him. “Didn’t see ya there, or I wouldn’ta gone on like that.”

“Scott, Christa, this my daughter, Willow. Willow, these are Nurses Scott Frountner and Christa Binter.”

“Oh, nice to meet you, Willow,” said Nurse Frountner while Nurse Binter merely nodded.

“Hi,” responded Willow, unable to make eye contact with the nurses when she spoke; her attention was completely occupied by the boy in the bed. She had to do something, but she couldn’t reach him from where she stood.

The elevator sounded when it reached the 4<sup>th</sup> floor.

“This is us,” said Nurse Frountner.

Willow watched in distress as the bed was wheeled off of the elevator. She had to act fast.

Just as the hind wheels rolled over the gap between the elevator and the floor ...

“WAIT!” Willow ran over to the boy in the bed and combed her fingers through his hair, lightly brushing his scalp. She then flicked her hand outside the open elevator door as her mother and the two other nurses stared at her, bemused.

“There was a spider on his head,” Willow lied. It was all she could think of. As soon as she said it, she thought: *A spider? In a sterile operating room? Really? You idiot!*

“This damn place is infested,” said Nurse Frountner. “I found a huge spider in my locker last week! Damn thing was the size of a baby tarantula; webs all over my shoes. Thanks, Willow.”

Willow rejoined her mother on the elevator and watched the doors close as the two nurses wheeled their patient down the hall.

“That was a close call,” said Mrs. Krimble.

“It sure was...”



## Facing Miss Prootts

While at school, Willow kept a low profile. She found it difficult to concentrate in her classes. She wanted to spend more time at the hospital, but realized it would appear quite suspicious if she went from room to room, looking for someone to help. Although she could not risk revealing her secret, she felt it pointless to attempt chin-ups in gym class while some poor child may be fighting for their life in a hospital wing.

She planned on trying to visit her mother at the hospital at least once a week, hoping to help anyone she could while no one else was watching. She knew this would not be easy.

Willow had to pretend she wasn't disappointed when her mother told her and Wyatt she would do her best not to take shifts that coincided with her children being home, so they could spend more time together as a family.

Aside from being preoccupied at school with constant reflection upon her covert tactics at the hospital, Willow found it awkward sitting in Miss Protts' class, feeling as if she had let her teacher down at the previous assembly. Miss Protts did not bring up the on-stage incident, and by the middle of the school week, Willow decided it was time she spoke to her.

At the end of class, everyone dashed out, including Razzel. Willow alerted her ahead of time that she planned on staying behind to speak with Miss Protts. Razzel did not agree with this decision. *"Are you crazy, Will? Let it go. Why poke an angry dog?"*

Willow approached the front of the classroom cautiously as she watched Miss Protts methodically gather her belongings. Just as Willow was about to clear her throat to get her teacher's attention...

"What is it, Krimble?" Miss Protts muttered, not bothering to look up from her task.

“Um, hi, Miss Protts. I just wanted to say ... about last week, in the assembly, I—”

“Save it, Krimble!” Miss Protts shoved a stack of homework assignments into her bag. “I haven’t got the time or the energy. My day’s over; punchin’ out.”

“But I just wanted to explain why I—”

“Explain what? How you let those silk snoots get the better of you?” Miss Protts finally fixed her squinted grey eyes, through her thick lenses, upon the student before her. “Do you have any idea how long it’s been since I’ve actually believed in a student, Krimble?”

Willow wanted to speak, but no response in her mind seemed adequate.

“We teachers bust our hump five days a week in this broken-down edifice, hoping that we’ll actually make a difference in someone’s life, only to be disappointed time and time again.”

Willow opened her mouth halfway, then closed it again.

“There’s nothing more frustrating than explaining the tragic struggle of a famous writer’s life, leading them to their poignant scroll, only to have a student check their watch and sigh. And those are the students that manage

to stay awake!”

Miss Protts slammed her clenched fists on her desk and leaned over it to get closer to her pupil.

“Then, every once in a while, you come across someone who actually gets it. A kid that *hears* you when you speak; someone who knows *how* to listen, not just through the two holes on either side of their head, but with every other sense given to them. A student whose eyes light up while you’re quoting Tennyson ... Chaucer ... Poe...” Miss Protts straightened up, retrieving her jacket from the back of her chair. She began putting it on, as her gaze seemed to shift toward her smudged chalkboard script.

“Sometimes you come across a kid that makes you feel you can actually retire knowing you brought something new to them, something they’ll take home with them, once they exit these four gum-stained walls.”

“Miss Protts, I—”

“Save the apology Krimble,” Miss Protts cut in, her tone a bit softer than what most students had come to expect of her. “Lord knows I know what it’s like to be embarrassed by peers.” She adjusted her jacket and shirt collar. “You don’t need *my* forgiveness. Apologize

to yourself." She grabbed her handbag and threw it over her shoulder.

"You wanna make it up to me, Krimble? Promise me you won't ever lose it."

"Lose it, Miss Prott's?"

"Your passion. You have an amazing gift inside of you, Krimble. Don't ever let anyone stop you from using it."

Willow was taken aback. For a brief moment, she thought Miss Prott's knew her secret.

"You're a talented writer, young lady. Don't hide behind your words; share them. And don't *ever* let anyone trip you up again!"

Miss Prott's grabbed the door handle and was about to make her exit.

"Miss Prott's!"

The English teacher froze, her hand still clasping the rusting brass knob of the scraped and weathered oak door. Although she stood at attention, her gaze was fixed straight ahead.

"Thank you," said Willow. "You've taught me so much more than just great poetry."

In that moment, Willow bore witness to one of the

rarest occurrences in Ginkelman history: Not daring to face her student, Miss Protts gave the slightest of grins, followed by a single, slow nod, just before she pulled the door open and made her exit.

# Chapter Eight

## Seeing Red



By the end of the school week, Willow received, what she perceived as, an exciting assignment in one of her toughest subjects: Art. She could barely keep a ruler straight, but the new assignment, which made up one-third of the class grade, was right up Willow's alley. Most of the class huffed as their teacher, Mr. Climbernit, assigned the entire class to go to an art museum and write a three-page report on any piece of art they found inspiring, while giving background information on the artist. Willow did not know the difference between warm and cool colors, but a research paper? No problem.

Willow and Razzel planned their trip to the museum for the following day. It took some pleading to convince their mothers to let them take the train an hour away

from home, into the city, but they promised they would hop right back on as soon as they were done and since it *was* for school...

"This should be fun," said Willow, as they made their way toward the museum steps.

"What-evs," replied Razzel. "It's Saturday; I'd rather be catching some cinema."

"Raz, we can go to the movies anytime. What was it you said to me on the phone last week? 'You need some culture, girl'? We never go to a museum. Just think, we can spend hours studying paintings that were done centuries ago and preserved—"

"Hours?" Razzel cut in. "Are you crazy? Let's just go to the gift shop, buy a postcard and copy the description off the back. Then we can go see *Outback Slayer 3D*. I hear it's a real gore-fest."

"You'd rather go see a campy slasher film about a killer who thinks his pet kangaroo is telling him who to dice, than to study Michelangelo?"

Razzel contemplated Willow's question before responding.

"But it's the final installment in a trilogy!"

“You’re hopeless, you know that, Raz? Besides, it’s R-rated. We’ll never get in – thank God.”

“Fine,” conceded Razzel, “we’re here, so we may as well do the assignment. But when we’re done, we’re checking out that DVD shop across the street.” Razzel pointed to a store-front called *Movie Imports*. There were movie posters all over the windows – mostly of Asian martial arts films.

“We’ll see,” replied Willow, fighting the urge to roll her eyes.

Willow and Razzel walked up the museum steps and made their way to the outdoor ticket kiosk. The only other people in line were three teenage boys in front of them. They looked about the same age as Willow and Razzel.

“They must go to school in the city,” whispered Willow.

Razzel shrugged, her arms crossed, waiting to purchase her ticket to boredom.

The three boys were very loud and using language that would make Mrs. Krimble cringe. When they reached the front of the kiosk, one boy, wearing a red baseball cap and jeans hanging so low below his waist,

his boxers were showing, walked up to the counter and threw a twenty-dollar bill on it.

“Yo, three student tickets, babe!” he said, smugly. He turned to his two friends. “But I use the term ‘babe’ very loosely.”

The three boys laughed and slapped hands as if this was the funniest joke ever told.

Razzel looked at Willow and sneered in disapproval.

“Let it go, Raz.” Willow continued to whisper. She noticed the lettering on the boy’s red cap: *MJ*. “Those letters on his hat probably stand for Major Jerk.”

The young girl behind the counter was in her early twenties, and when she spoke to the three boys, Willow and Razzel could tell there was something odd about her speech:

“Choo like to ... donate a dolla to Sss ... *Say It ... Loud*, da senta faw da speech imp ... impayard?”

The three boys stared at one another, each of them wearing the same bemused expression. After a few moments, the boy in the red baseball cap responded.

“Was that English or some foreign language? Sorry, but I don’t speak *Special Olympics*.” The three friends exploded into laughter once again.

The girl behind the counter looked dejected as she slid the boy's tickets and change across the counter.

Still laughing, the boy in the red cap took his change and noticed the girl's expression. He took a dollar bill, crumpled it up and threw it at her. It deflected off her forehead and landed on the counter.

"There," he said, "put that toward some speech lessons." The hooting response to this act was deafening.

Willow looked at Razzel and recognized the enraged expression on her face.

"Oh, boy," said Willow, "I know *that* look. This isn't gonna be pretty, is it?"

Razzel marched up to the boys as if Willow's words were white noise. Willow made no move in halting her; she merely kept one step behind her.

Razzel walked right up to the ringleader, stopping a few inches from him. She looked him straight in the eye, wearing an irate expression. All three boys stopped laughing at once. The boy in the red cap was a good six inches taller than Razzel, but this didn't appear to faze her. He waited for Razzel to speak, but she just stared him down until one of the other boys broke the silence.

"Looks like you've got an admirer, bro."

“What do *you* want, little girl?” said the boy in the red cap.

“I want *you*, and your girlfriends here, to apologize to the lady,” replied Razzel, through gritted teeth.

The boy in the cap turned to his friends, smiled and pointed to Razzel as if she had just told a joke of her own. He turned back to face her.

“Why don’t *you*, and your little friend here, get out of my face before you both get damaged.”

“I’m gonna ask you one more time...” said Razzel, removing her glasses, handing them to Willow, “...apologize to the lady.”

“I’d do what she says,” Willow chimed in. “Trust me, it’s for the best. When she gets like this there’s just no way to —”

“AND I ASKED *YOU* TO GET OUTTA MY FACE!” the boy in the cap shouted, forming a pistol shape with his thumb, index and middle fingers, pressing them against Razzel’s left temple.

There were a few moments of tense silence before Razzel’s sudden grin confused her adversary. It all happened so quickly and the other two boys could not react fast enough to save their fearless leader.

Razzel grabbed her opponent's wrist and twisted it around so rapidly, the boy's cap flew off of his head as he flipped over, his back making a sickening thud as it slammed against the marble floor. He wasn't certain what hurt more: his throbbing back, his neck, which was being twisted back by Razzel's foot pushing against his jaw, his hyper-extended arm, or his right wrist, which Razzel was bending forward in a way in which human anatomy was not accustomed.

The girl behind the counter was in awe as Razzel effortlessly stood over her opponent. Willow just shook her head as if she expected nothing less.

The two other boys, realizing what had just transpired in the last three seconds, looked at one another, undecided what their next move should be. Razzel made up their minds for them.

"I wouldn't try anything stupid," she said to the two cohorts, with a satisfied smirk. "I might accidentally ... *break* something." She applied more pressure to her opponent's wrist, forcing him to let out a squeal of pain, emphasizing her point.

The two boys, in unison, turned their attention to Willow.

“Don’t look at me,” she said. She leaned forward towards the two boys and whispered, “She’s crazy!”

The two cronies decided to remain rooted to their spots as Razzel addressed their superior.

“Let’s see,” she said, “where were we ... ah yes, you were going to apologize.” Razzel’s foot applied more pressure to the boy’s jaw, forcing him to look at the girl behind the kiosk, who was peering down at him in disbelief.

“When I get up...” the boy spat, but Razzel’s foot pressed on his jaw even harder. The pain coming from several points in his body became too much for him. “...Alright, alright ... s-s-sorry.”

Razzel addressed the girl behind the kiosk.

“Did you hear that? He’s ‘s-s-sorry.’”

The girl nodded with a satisfied grin.

“That’s enough, Raz,” Willow interjected.

Razzel looked disappointed, as if a fun game was just forced to come to a close. She rolled her eyes and released the boy. She watched him struggle to his feet, as he moaned and winced the entire time.

She was so satisfied with herself, she didn’t even notice Willow leaving her side and sprinting toward the

museum entrance.

As the boy groaned, bending down to pick up his red baseball cap, Razzel snatched his crumpled dollar from the counter. She then placed it into the cap the boy was holding.

“Here...” she said, “...put that towards some chivalry lessons.”

The girl behind the counter couldn't help but let out a bubbly giggle.

The three boys were seething, but none more than the one placing the red cap back onto his head.

“You just made a big mistake, little girl!”

All three boys were standing across from Razzel with clenched fists. She got into a fighting stance and smirked.

“Sweet, “ she said, “three girls against one. Bring it!”

Just as the three boys were about to pounce, Razzel felt a tight grasp on her arm. She instinctively turned around, ready to strike, but halted when she realized it was Willow gripping her. Razzel was also surprised to see a tall muscular man in uniform standing alongside her best friend.

“That's them,” said Willow, pointing to the three

boys.

The museum guard was intimidating, even to a group of angry teenage boys. When he spoke, his deep voice commanded everyone's attention.

"Is there a problem here, fellas?"

As Willow and Razzel expected, the boy in the cap was the first to speak.

"*She* started this!" he said, pointing to Razzel. "We were just trying to get into the museum."

The security guard was about to interrogate Razzel when the girl behind the kiosk called out to him.

"Phil!" she beckoned.

The guard turned his attention to the kiosk.

"What is it, Sarah?"

She pointed to the group of boys, "Dey med funna me. Threw mun-nee at mummy head."

The guard suddenly looked incensed. He turned and grabbed the boy with the cap by his shirt and elevated him off the ground with one hand.

The boy swallowed hard.

"It was just a joke," he pleaded.

"Do I look like I'm laughin'?" replied the guard, his brows furrowed.

The boy didn't answer.

"You three have exactly five seconds to get outta my sight!" the guard threatened, releasing the boy.

The boy in the cap's knees buckled when he touched ground, forcing him to stumble backwards into his friends. They caught him just before he could fall. He gave Razzel one final threatening stare.

"This isn't over," the boy hissed.

Razzel responded by blowing him a kiss. The boy motioned to his partners to leave.

"Let's hit the Starcade," he mumbled. "It's what we usually do on weekends anyway," he added as if it were his idea to leave the museum. The two cronies nodded as they eyed the massive form glowering at them.

Willow and Razzel watched in silence as the three boys crossed the street and greeted a fourth boy standing outside the *The Shooting Starcade*.

The security guard turned to the girl behind the kiosk.

"Anyone bothers you again, Sarah, you just page me. Got it?"

"Tenks, Phil."

“When those little boys are done with their video games, if they just look at you crossly, you let me know.”

Sarah smiled and nodded to her protector.

“You two ladies have a good day now,” the guard said to Willow and Razzel.

Both Willow and Razzel nodded as the Goliath in uniform made his way back to his post.

Willow walked up to the counter and took out her money.

“N-no...” said Sarah, “...yer tickets er paid faw.” She handed Willow two of the three tickets left on the counter, which the boy in the red cap did not claim, as he was too busy mocking.

“Wow, thanks so much,” said Willow, accepting the tickets.

“Tenk you and tenk *you* speshly,” said Sarah, pointing to Razzel.

“Are you kidding?” replied Razzel. “I thought today would be boring. That was the most fun I’ve had in weeks.”

Sarah beamed.

“You see, Raz. You never know how the day’s gonna

turn out.”

Willow turned around and touched Sarah on the back of her hand.

“Thanks again, Sarah. We really appreciate it.” Willow withdrew her hand as Sarah returned a smile.

“You are very welcome,” replied Sarah. She looked quite confused by the clarity of her speech. Willow did not look back. She quickly grabbed Razzel’s arm, who was keeping watch, making certain her three new admirers were not returning.

“Let’s go, killer. Culture awaits.”

“But I was having so much fun.”

“I must admit, those guys deserved it, but you can’t beat up *everyone* that pisses you off, Raz.”

“Why not?”

Willow laughed.

“Don’t they teach you patience and tolerance in those Kung Fu classes?”

“Jiu-Jitsu,” Razzel corrected. “Sure they teach that stuff, but I never do well in those sessions.”

“Well, keep at it.”

“Speaking of *keeping at it*, have you been practicing those defensive moves I taught you?”

“You mean the one where I push my opponent’s nose into his brain?”

“Don’t joke, Will. You never know when you’re gonna be attacked. Just trying to keep my girl safe.”

“Who’d pick on me with *Fearless Fiora* by my side?”

Razzel laughed as Willow opened the door to the museum entrance.

## Chapter Nine



### Clean Up On Aisle Three

It was Sunday afternoon when Mrs. Krimble and her children arrived home from mass. Willow insisted on preparing her family an old fashioned Italian feast. She borrowed a recipe book from Mrs. Fiora and was looking forward to making a pesto sauce she had tasted at Razzel's house one summer evening. She had already prepared meatballs with Razzel the previous night, after they finished their museum assignment.

"The sauce and pasta should only take about 20 minutes to prepare," Willow assured her ravenous brother. She opened the spice cabinet and cringed. "Oh, man, I forgot. I used up the last bit of olive oil to fry the meatballs last night."

"Let's have at those meatballs," said Wyatt. "I'm feeling faint."

"Wyatt, cut it out," said Mrs. Krimble.

“I have an idea,” said Willow. “You guys boil the pasta so that when I get back, I can throw the sauce together and we can eat right away.”

“Get back from where?” asked Mrs. Krimble.

“I’ll just run to Kresh Fruits,” said Willow. “Be right back. Keep him away from the meatballs.”

Wyatt let out a deep sigh.

Willow cut through Shashaw Park, as usual, and glanced at the children running, jumping, climbing and shouting. She wondered whether she would ever run into the little girl she helped. *What was her name again? Alison?*

Willow exited the north gate and could see the sign for Kresh Fruits across the street. She entered the crowded store and spotted Mr. Kresh. He looked furious as he argued with a man holding a clipboard.

“I told yous guys before, them bananas is already too ripe when they gets here. I wants ‘em greener next time, er I’ll find another vendor; ya got me?”

Willow felt sorry for the man with the clipboard. He was just trying to make a delivery, and Mr. Kresh could be quite intimidating.

She made her way down aisle three, the spice aisle, in search for extra-virgin olive oil. When she reached her destination, she recognized a familiar face, albeit not a friendly one. The redheaded boy with the ponytail, who was her cashier on her previous trip to the market, was now stocking shelves. He was placing jars of tomato sauce on the top shelf with one hand while holding a large portable CD player in the other. Willow was surprised to see such an obsolete piece of equipment. She noticed gray electrical tape holding together the band on the large set of headphones around the boy's head, which was bobbing to the rhythm of whatever he was listening to.

Willow needed to reach under the step-stool the boy was standing on in order to reach the olive oil. She made eye contact with the boy and smiled at him. Much like their previous encounter, he did not return it. Willow considered asking the boy to kindly move aside, but thought better of it. She stretched her arm under the stool and grabbed the first bottle her hand made contact with. She extracted the bottle and examined it. Regular olive oil ... no good; she needed extra-virgin. She was very particular with her cooking and she learned from

Razzel's father that extra-virgin olive oil was the best for flavor.

Willow looked up at the boy, who appeared to be in his own secluded world. She noticed he only had a few jars left to shelve. As soon as the boy finished, Willow would seize her opportunity to obtain her ingredient.

The boy stepped down from his stool and as soon as his foot touched ground, no less than one dozen jars came crashing down to the floor, shattering all over the aisle, some spattering Willow on her shirt. Several customers poked their heads into the aisle, curious to see who or what had caused such a raucous.

Mr. Kresh came running down the aisle, a look of horror on his face. His eyes darted back and forth several times between his nephew and the mess of scarlet-coated glass. He didn't seem to notice Willow. He placed his hands on his balding head and gasped, as if he was trying to speak, but couldn't. He did this for a few seconds until finally... "YOU!" he bellowed pointing to the boy. "I TOLD YOUS YESTADY, THIS HERE SHELF STOCKIN' WAS YER LAST CHANCE! OUT! GET OUT! YER FIRED! I DON'T GIVES A DAMN WHO YOUS RELATED TO!"

Willow expected the boy to look indifferent; he never came across as someone who was happy to work in his uncle's grocery store. She was surprised to see that he actually looked disappointed as he removed his headphones.

"It was an accident," he said, apologetically.

"Hiring yous was an accident!" barked Mr. Kresh. "Clean up this here mess and hit da bricks."

Willow couldn't understand why she was about to lie, but just as Mr. Kresh turned on his heel and began to storm away, "It was my fault, Mr. Kresh!"

Mr. Kresh stopped dead in his tracks and quickly spun around. He and his nephew stared at Willow, both with the same dumbfounded expressions.

"Yous made this here mess?"

"Yes, sir. You see ... I needed to get to the olive oil and rather than wait for your nephew to finish, I reached in impatiently and knocked into the stool he was standing on and, well ... he must have knocked into the jars to regain his footing. I'm just glad he didn't fall and hurt himself."

Mr. Kresh surveyed his nephew suspiciously.

"Hmm ... lucky fa him."

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Kresh. I'll clean it up and pay for it, of course."

Willow felt a wave of anxiety flow through her as Haskell Kresh scrutinized her. She was never on the receiving end of his wrath and she never imagined she would be. After several tense moments, however, Mr. Kresh forced a smile.

"Ah, feget about it, doll. These things happen, right? Tell yer motha I says 'hello.'" He turned to his nephew. "You clean this up and start shelving them canned peaches that came in today."

Mr. Kresh stomped away shaking his head, mumbling, "At least cans can't shatta..."

"You know, he didn't buy a word of that," said the boy, "but since he can't call one of his loyal customers a liar... I really owe you one."

"Don't mention it," replied Willow, as she quickly grabbed her olive oil of choice, replacing it with the initial bottle she grabbed in haste. She had placed herself in an awkward situation and was anxious to make her exit.

Willow turned to leave.

"What's your name?" the boy called to his rescuer.

“Willow.”

“I remember you. You were here my first day on register. I screwed up the dollar amount. That wasn’t the last time, by the way. My uncle thinks I’ve been stealing from him, which is why I’m on stock duty now.”

“Okay, well ... see ya,” said Willow, turning and walking away from the scene as fast as she could. Why couldn’t she speak to him? Brusque people never intimidated her before. Hell, her best friend was Razzel Fiora!

## Chapter Ten Sandy Whisp



Willow spent the next several weeks doing her best to get to the hospital, keeping her eyes and ears open at all times for anyone in need of her special ability. It was becoming increasingly difficult for her to help someone without revealing her secret. She had mastered the art of pretending to trip and grab someone, to regain her footing, thus making contact with the person she was trying to help.

Willow felt embarrassed when a man on crutches scolded her for being “a klutz.” She didn’t linger for the man to come out of the examination room, worried he might assemble the puzzle, as his broken leg was suddenly and mysteriously mended.

Willow had a close-call one October evening. While bringing her mother some dinner at the hospital, she visited the Burn Unit where she placed her hands on a heavily sedated six-year-old boy with second-degree

burns on his face. When the nurse on duty returned, Willow had to play dumb, as if she was lost: *"Oh, my mom must've given me the wrong floor..."* Willow was already a fair distance from the boy's bed when she was interrogated by the nurse on duty, whose shift was just ending. When the burns were gone from the child's face the following morning, the doctors were extremely baffled.

After several weeks of similar events, Willow decided she had better not visit the hospital for a while. She couldn't keep roaming the floors, leaving a bunch of unsolved mysteries in her trail. No matter how large the hospital was, she didn't need the staff buzzing about the mysterious healings taking place on various floors. She was especially worried that someone might think to check a security tape, spotting her exiting a patient's room.

The hospital wasn't the only place Willow used her gift. One woman with a neck brace was surprised to see Willow approach her in the mall and ask for the time. Since she couldn't bend her neck, the woman had to raise her left arm, past her eye level, in order to give Willow a response. Willow thanked her by shaking her

hand, and then made a swift getaway down the escalator where Razzel was buying pretzels for them.

Willow was never positive that her gift had worked on everyone, since she was always so quick to make a clean escape. She was also uncertain as to how long it took for her “patients” to heal, and often wondered if it all depended on the severity of their injury or illness.

Between school and her covert activities, the Fall seemed to fly by for Willow. Before she knew it, Halloween and Thanksgiving had passed in a blur. The Saturday after Thanksgiving, Willow decided to go to The Fritzfield Mall by herself. She wanted to buy a Christmas gift for Razzel. Razzel had always wanted a large lava lamp for her room... *“I want one with red liquid that looks like large droplets of blood floating around...”* Razzel always felt they were too expensive, so Willow had been setting aside some of her allowance each week to buy one for her.

When she arrived at the mall and exited the bus, she walked through the open square in the back, rather than go through the main, front entrance. She knew the square would be decorated for the holidays and loved

to view the display of lights and animated figures. She was often teased by Razzel and Wyatt for *"wasting time looking at the kiddie stuff."*

Willow had just entered the square when she began to hear singing. As she got closer to the center of the square, the song grew louder and the lyrics clearer. The female voice sounded so beautiful. She knew she had heard the song in some holiday film, but she couldn't quite place it. It didn't matter; she was drawn to it.

When Willow reached the singer, she couldn't see her. A large crowd of shoppers, who had stopped to listen to the performance, obstructed Willow's view. Everyone was whispering and pointing. Willow had seen street performers before, but never one that had drawn such a vast audience. After the girl finished her song on a long, high note, the crowd roared with applause and praise. Willow still couldn't see who was receiving this thunderous ovation. She heard the voice once again, but this time it was not in song.

"Thank you all so much. I appreciate your support, but there are others that need your support more than me.

If you wish to make a donation, please see Caroline, to my left, and she will take down all of your information. Thomas, to my right, is handing out cards with the website which you can donate to at your earliest convenience. We also have CD's for sale, where all of the proceeds will go to *The Center for Neuromuscular Diseases*. The website is also on the back of the CD. Please take a moment to log on whenever you get a chance. It has a ton of information on the type of research the Center does which has helped so many people, like myself, in coping with their condition. My name is Sandy Whisp. Thanks again for standing out in the cold with me. Happy Holidays, everyone."

The crowd applauded once again and began to disperse into two lines. As the sea of people parted, Willow could see that the person she had been listening to was not what she had expected at all; the girl was sitting in a wheelchair, and appeared to be quite short. Through her tights and leg warmers, the girl's legs appeared thin and frail, as if the slightest bit of muscle tissue was wrapped around fragile bones. She had short, cropped, black hair with a purple streak running through the right side, and her eyes were like nothing

Willow had ever seen. They weren't blue, but closer to purple; a shade of violet that was almost the exact tone as the streak glistening in the girl's hair. She appeared to be in her early twenties, but it was difficult to tell for sure.

Willow continued to stare in amazement as the girl graciously shook the hands of her new fans, who were praising her amazing vocal ability. She lingered for a few minutes until she heard the last person compliment the talented singer. "A beautiful voice for a beautiful girl," an elderly woman observed as she shook Sandy's hand and parted from the performance area to continue her shopping.

Willow approached the girl cautiously as she watched her roll up the wire to her microphone.

The young girl spotted Willow and gave her a welcoming smile.

"Hello" she said. "Do you need help with something?"

"I just wanted to tell you what an amazing voice you have," replied Willow. "I'd love to buy a CD."

"Thank you so much, but I'm afraid the last CD just sold. Oh, but you can order one from our website."

The man, standing behind Sandy, handed Willow a card.

“Thanks,” replied Willow. She looked down at the card between her fingers and felt the urge to speak with Sandy in private. Maybe she could help this girl, but there was another reason. She was amazed by Sandy’s poise; the way she carried herself as if nothing at all was wrong with her. Willow was intrigued at the thought of speaking with someone who had to cope with a physical, visible handicap on a daily bases. Although Willow could tell Razzel anything, she never felt comfortable bringing up how self-conscious she felt about her leg because she felt Razzel could not relate.

Willow struggled with her thoughts for a moment and was suddenly struck with a solution to her dilemma, as she glanced across the square.

“Can I interest you in a hot chocolate?” she said, pointing to the *Crispy Buns Cinnashop* directly across the path.

“You’re too kind, but I’m allergic to chocolate.”

Willow looked deflated.

“But, I would never say ‘no’ to a large Crispy Spindle with extra cream,” said Sandy.

Willow smiled. "You know, I did skip breakfast this morning..."

"You guys okay to clean up?" Sandy asked her two colleagues. They both nodded. "Thanks. I'll meet you both at the front entrance in a half hour or so."

Willow followed Sandy as she wheeled herself along the path, up the short ramp, just outside the entrance of the *Crispy Buns*. Willow held the door open as Sandy wheeled herself to the edge of an open booth.

"I'll be right back," said Willow.

She got on line, ordered two Crispy Spindles, extra frosting on the side, and two bottles of water. She walked the tray over to the booth, set it down and placed her hand on Sandy's right wrist.

"Thanks so much for meeting with me," she said.

"No problem," Sandy smiled back.

Willow stared at Sandy for a moment. She wasn't sure what she expected to happen; what Sandy was stricken with was more than an injury or a sudden illness. Willow released her grip ... *nothing*. As disappointed as Willow was, she wasn't surprised; she knew there had to be limitations to her power, otherwise she would have sprouted a new leg by now.

“Man, I haven’t had one of these in a while,” said Sandy, picking up the larger of the two buns from the tray.

“Me neither,” replied Willow. “They’re sooo good, but after I eat one, I feel like I need a nap.”

Sandy smiled as she spread extra cream onto her cinnamon bun.

“So,” she said, “here you are treating me to my favorite dessert and I don’t even know your name.”

“Oh, sorry,” said Willow, removing her winter coat and wool hat. “My name’s Willow – Willow Krimble.”

“Krimble? I can’t quite place that. What’s your background?”

“Oh, we’re mixed. My mom’s Polish and Irish; my Dad was English and German.”

“Your dad *was*?”

“He passed away shortly after my seventh birthday.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Willow Krimble. I do have a knack for asking the wrong questions at times.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Willow. “You couldn’t have known.”

When Willow sat, Sandy noticed her prosthetic limb as her pant leg pulled up a bit.

“So,” said Sandy, wiping her mouth from another large bite, “it seems as if you wanted to speak with me about something specific, and not just my singing.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“That’s the other thing I have a knack for; being able to read people when they have something on their mind. And you, Willow Krimble, have a ton on yours. So, what’s up?”

“Well, Sandy ... the way you sang out there ... you ever ... *have* you ever thought what your life might be like if you didn’t have your ... condition?”

Sandy smiled and Willow was relieved to see she was not offended by her question.

“You know, I have thought about that – many times. How maybe I should be on some large, prestigious stage somewhere jumping around with choreographed back-up dancers, thousands of people cheering me instead of a few dozen in malls, schools and hospitals. Oh, believe you me, Willow Krimble, I have thought about it.”

Sandy took another bite, wiped her fingers with her napkin and took a sip of water. She looked up at Willow and took a deep breath.

“When I was about your age,” she began, “I was in the hospital visiting a friend of mine that I had met at the Center when we were both very young. His name was Danny. He was diagnosed with a much more advanced and severe case of muscular dystrophy than mine. I won’t bore you with the medical jargon. By the time I arrived at the hospital with my dad, Danny’s parents were outside his room, crying inconsolably. Doctors said he only had about 12-24 hours left. His parents allowed me to go in and see him by myself for a few minutes ... to say goodbye.”

Sandy seemed to gaze at her tray for a moment, ensnared in thought.

“He was in a bad way when I saw him, wasted away to practically—” she swallowed hard and turned her attention back to Willow, forcing a weak smile, “—so, I asked him if there was anything I could do for him, anything at all.” She took another sip of water. “After a few moments of silence, he muttered something about singing to him. You see, when we were younger, we used to sing songs together to cheer ourselves up. You know, kiddie songs. I hadn’t sung since I was six, and even then it was only noise, but I had to try. I thought

about one of the songs we used to sing together, *Sun Over The Stream*. When I opened my mouth, I couldn't believe what happened; it was as if something had taken me over, as if I had suddenly, at that moment, been given an incredible gift that I hadn't previously possessed. Danny kept his eyes closed, but smiled the entire time I sang to him. He proved the doctors wrong that day." She took another bite as Willow leaned forward in her seat in anticipation. While Sandy chewed, Willow grew impatient.

"Did he live?" Willow asked anxiously.

Sandy shook her head. She wiped her lips with a clean napkin and swallowed.

"He passed as soon as I finished my song."

Willow slumped down into her seat.

"Oh, I'm not telling you this story to depress you, Willow Krimble. You see, I made his last few moments peaceful for him. Even moments after he passed, he never lost his smile. And I never would have known I *could* sing like that, had it not been for him."

Willow nodded.

"So, whenever I wonder what life may be like for me if I were, let's say, for lack of a better term, *normal*, I

come to realize that what I get to do is so much better than *normal*. I don't entertain for fame and fortune, but if I can inspire anyone sick or well to try something new that they never thought they could do... Would I be happier if I were the next Celine? I can't harp on what I have no control over; I can only go as far as I can with what I've been given. And that's something I can be extremely proud of, no matter what the CD sales say."

Willow straightened up in her seat, smiled and took a bite out of her cinnamon bun.

"You know something, Sandy? My Grams would really like you."

Sandy smiled.

## Chapter Eleven Talent



“I can’t believe it’s already December 5<sup>th</sup>,” said Razzel, clearing out her locker for the day. “Remind me again how we got roped into going to this talent show?”

“Come on, Raz,” replied Willow, “we promised Brent. He’s so excited.”

“What-evs.”

Since the day the talent show was announced, Brent Deital had carried on about rehearsing a complicated dance routine he deemed to be at a professional level, which infused several different dance styles. Willow and Razzel tried to appear interested, but when they couldn’t muster up the energy, Taren Swirle more than made up for them with her unbridled enthusiasm... *“Wow! That routine sounds killer, Brent!”*

The talent show was to begin at 5pm. Willow stayed behind after her last class and did her homework in the school library while Razzel took the bus home, promising to return in time for the show. She couldn't bear to spend one extra minute in school than she absolutely needed to.

Taren was in the school gym with Brent watching him rehearse his routine, boosting his ego with cheers of approval.

Willow finished her math homework at 4:30pm and decided she'd better make her way down to the auditorium. Usually Ginkelman seemed completely abandoned after 3pm, but today the halls were buzzing with excitement. Willow passed students dressed in all sorts of elaborate costumes. Brian Flimp, from Art class, was actually wearing stilts and kept on knocking his head into the ceiling as his mother reprimanded him for not measuring the ceiling height beforehand. "The auditorium is much higher, Mom, I swear!"

In the stairwell, Willow recognized a group of five girls from History class, dressed as the famous boy-band, *Intone*, rehearsing their dance moves.

Willow stifled a laugh as she walked by, carefully avoiding all eye contact.

Behind every corner she turned, there were students rehearsing for what they hoped would be the winning performance. Initially, only a handful of students signed up for the talent show, but once Principal Sabina announced the grand prize of a family trip to Hawaii, while second place was a \$500 gift certificate good at any store in the Fritzfield Mall, the talent committee had to turn students away once they reached their limit of 20 acts.

When Willow reached the auditorium, she could see that seats were already filling up with students and family members, waiting to cheer on their favorite act. She looked out into the vast assembly and spotted Taren, waving to her from the sixth row of the center aisle.

As she began to make her way toward her friend, Willow was almost knocked over by a student wearing a polar bear costume and couldn't tell whether it was a male or female under the bulky mask. She was grateful to finally reach her seat.

"Hey, Taren. Thanks for saving the seats. This place is

almost full already.”

“I know,” replied a euphoric Taren, “and these seats are perfect, aren’t they?”

“They’re great. What’s Brent up to?”

“He’s backstage for one final warm-up. I just saw his act in the gym and it’s totally original.”

“I can’t wait to see it,” said Willow. “I’ll just place my bag on this seat between us to save it for Raz.”

“Good idea; we wouldn’t want anyone taking—”

Willow could see Taren’s eyes shift their gaze and knew something, or someone, had distracted her. Willow turned around to find herself face to face with Snella Burinbine, flanked by Carmen and Fusia, all holding digital cameras.

“Sorry, ladies,” said Snella, “but this section is reserved for the yearbook committee. Not that we wouldn’t rather be home doing *anything* else, but since we need to cover this pathetic snooze-fest, we *will* need you to vacate the area.”

“I don’t see any signs,” said Willow.

“I don’t have time to hang up signs, Krimble! Now move it along unless you want to have another...” Snella took turns smirking at her associates,

“...accident.

“You tend to get very clumsy in this auditorium ... don’t you?”

Willow gave Snella a heated stare before grabbing her bag and leaving the area, Taren walking silently at her heels.

It took some searching, but Willow and Taren finally found three seats together in the second-to-last row in the right aisle.

“This isn’t so bad,” said Taren, fully aware of Willow’s frustration. “At least it’s across from the main entrance. We can spot Razzel as soon as she comes in.”

“Yeah, but will she see *us*, all the way back here?”

“It’ll be fine,” said Taren, taking her seat. “I wonder where Shayla is tonight.”

“Who cares?” replied Willow. “I’m more concerned with where Raz is. The show starts in 10 minutes.”

Just as Willow slumped down into her seat, Taren stood up again.

“There she is,” she said, waving both hands in the air for Razzel to notice her.

Razzel ran down the aisle, knocking into several parents, not pausing to apologize. Her anxious expression

alarmed Willow; it was very uncharacteristic of Razzel to look worried.

“Will ... thank God ... I found you!” said Razzel, panting to catch her breath.

“What is it, Raz? What’s wrong?”

“Your mom ... called my mom ... on her cell. It’s...”

“What?”

“...It’s your grandmother. She’s ... in the hospital.”

Willow’s heart sank.

“Wha – what are you talking about?”

“I don’t know the details, but it sounds ... Let’s just go! My mom’s in the lot waiting to take us to the hospital.”

Willow stood up, put on her coat and hat and flung her backpack over her shoulders. Taren wished Willow luck as she and Razzel darted for the exit. They ran through the halls, dodging students, parents and teachers along their path. Just as they reached the rear-building exit, Willow paused.

“Wait!” she said to Razzel, stopping short. “This means a lot to Brent.”

Razzel was bewildered.

“So what are you saying? You don’t wanna –”

“Of course *I’m* going to the hospital, but *you* should stay. No sense in both of us missing his big debut.”

“Are you sure? What if you need—”

“I’ll be fine. Go. And tell Brent I’m sorry.”

Razzel contemplated Willow’s proposal for a moment.

“Alright, but tell my mom you *made* me stay. She’s parked by the giant red oak in the south lot, you know, where the graffiti—”

“I got it. I’ll call you later, and thanks a lot, Raz.”

“Get out of here,” Razzel ordered, “you’re wasting time.”

Willow exited the building, passing a group of grandparents, making her all-the-more anxious to get to the hospital.

Just as she was rounding the corner of the school building to the rear lot, Willow heard the sound of screeching tires, followed by a scream, then a car speeding away. She sprinted around the corner of the building and, to her horror, she could see a figure lying on the ground in the middle of the crosswalk. No one else was around. Everyone was already inside getting ready for the show.

Willow ran to the lifeless body and was shaken to see a familiar face staring up at her, in a state of shock.

“Shayla!” Willow cried out as she knelt down alongside the victim. The only blood Willow could see was on Shayla’s mouth and chin.

Based on her mother’s accounts from the hospital, Willow surmised that Shayla must have internal-bleeding.

Shayla looked up at Willow and tried to speak. The moment she opened her mouth, she let out a cry of pain as she spat up blood.

“Ssshhh. Don’t try to talk, Shayla. Just relax.”

Shayla didn’t listen. She tried to mouth something to Willow, but Willow couldn’t make it out.

“Don’t speak, Shayla and try not to move.”

Again, Shayla insisted on trying to get her message to Willow. She gestured with her right hand for Willow to come closer. Willow put her ear a few inches from Shayla’s mouth. She just barely made out the one word Shayla had been trying to say... “Ssscaared.”

“Don’t be afraid, Shayla. I’m here. It’s okay.”

Shayla’s hand motioned for Willow to come closer once more. Willow put her ear to Shayla’s mouth and

listened as hard as she could to try and decipher the next message... "Ssss—"

"I know you're scared, Shayla but—"

Shayla shook her head and motioned for Willow to come back. Willow listened intently to hear what Shayla was trying to say... "Ssssorrreee."

Willow stared at Shayla for a moment.

"Don't you dare do this to me, Shayla. You think you could just apologize, and then leave me? No way! We're starting over. We'll pick up where we left off by my tree-house before you got your precious red silk dress all dirty."

Shayla looked up at Willow and Willow saw her do something she hadn't done in years: Shayla smiled. But suddenly the pain became too much for her and she let out a huge gasp, spitting up more blood.

"Alright, Shayla, let's start over." Willow placed one hand on Shayla's forehead, the other on her stomach, and peered directly into Shayla's eyes. "Come on, Shayla, you'll be okay ... you'll be alright." Shayla coughed up more blood. Willow struggled to hide the fear in her own eyes as she continued...

"Come on, Shayla..." Willow forced a smile past the

dread coursing through her, "...time to get up now."

Shayla gave Willow one final desperate expression before she closed her eyes and went completely limp.

"NO! SHAYLA! PLEASE! SHAYLAAAAA!"

Akin to waking from a nightmare, Shayla bolted upright and inhaled a swift gulp of oxygen as if she had just been submerged in water. She looked at Willow completely mystified. She clutched her stomach with her right hand, dabbing the blood on her lower lip with her left.

"Willow ... what did you —"

"You scared the hell out of me, Shayla."

"But ... you ... How?"

"Did you see the car that hit you?" said Willow, disregarding Shayla's disorientation.

Shayla shook her head, her eyes transfixed on her redeemer.

"Shayla, I've got to go right now, but please, promise me you won't say anything about this to anyone."

Shayla didn't answer. She continued to stare at Willow, speechless, now both hands on her stomach, where the pain had completely subsided.

"SHAYLA!" Willow raised her voice, startling Shayla

out of her trance. "Promise me!"

Shayla gave a single, slow nod.

"Great! Look, I really do need to go. We'll talk about this tomorrow."

Willow stood up and made her way to the large red oak tree, where Mrs. Fiora was waiting for her, leaving Shayla seated on the crosswalk, incredulously grasping her stomach.

# Chapter Twelve

## A New Friend

Six Years Earlier...



It was Willow's seventh birthday and the house was decorated with Crazy Kitten balloons. The Krimbles always celebrated their children's birthdays by holding a small gathering with immediate family and just a few of their children's closest friends.

It was 5pm when the doorbell rang. A nine-year-old boy shouted, "I'll get it!" He slid down the staircase banister and answered the door. Two elderly people peered down at him.

"Grandma, Grandpa!" the boy screeched enthusiastically, hugging his Grandma Trisha and his Grandpa Theo around their waists. Grandma Trisha looked down at him suspiciously.

“Well, hello, Wyatt,” she said hugging him back. “The way you’re carrying on, one might think it was *your* birthday.”

Wyatt grabbed Grandpa Theo around the wrist and pulled him across the threshold. Grandpa Theo almost tripped.

“Whoa,” he said. “What’s the rush?”

Wyatt glared at his grandfather with a huge smile.

“Did you bring it, Grandpa?”

Grandpa Theo rubbed his chin.

“Now, let’s see ... was I supposed to bring something?”

Wyatt tugged hard on his grandfather’s shirt.

“Grandpaaaa?”

Grandpa Theo reached behind his back and pulled out an old weathered comic book.

“As promised,” he said.

“Wow! The first issue of *Warrior Skull*! I can’t believe it!”

“It’s not in the best condition, mind you. I’ve had it since I was *your* age, but I would imagine it would still fetch a pretty penny.”

“Oh, I’m never selling this, Grandpa.”

“Wyatt, who was at the door?” a voice called from the kitchen. “Oh, hi, Mom. Hey, Dad,” Mrs. Krimble greeted her parents, joining them in the living room. She was accompanied by a frail, withered man at her side. They seemed to be walking arm-and-arm, but upon closer examination, anyone could see that the man was leaning on Mrs. Krimble for support. He was gaunt and almost skeletal but he gave his guests a broad, welcoming smile.

“Hey, guys,” said Roger Krimble, taking a seat in the closest chair he could grab.

“How are you feeling, Roger dear?” asked Grandma Trisha, walking over, bending down to give him a kiss.

“Oh, not too bad,” Roger Krimble lied. He was always so fatigued these days. The leukemia he was diagnosed with two years prior, along with the numerous treatments he was undergoing, had taken its toll on his 43-year-old body. But every day was a gift to him and he was thrilled to see his little girl turning seven. He was always happiest when surrounded by family.

“Where’s our little angel?” asked Grandpa Theo, gently grasping Mr. Krimble’s shoulder.

"She's putting on her dress," replied Mrs. Krimble. "She should be down any minute."

The doorbell rang again. This time, however, Wyatt was too engrossed in his comic book to care.

"I got it," said Grandpa Theo." As he opened the door, he saw a six-year-old girl with glasses gazing up at him. She looked extremely uncomfortable wearing a pink dress. She was accompanied by a beautiful black woman with long, kinky black hair, holding a yellow box with a green bow. She smiled at Grandpa Theo.

"Hi, I'm Diane Fiora," she said, extending her hand."

Grandpa Theo shook it, smiling.

"Ah, so this is the lovely lady who produced our feisty little Razzel, here." Razzel smiled up at him, exposing her gums where two front teeth previously occupied. "Please, come in."

After Razzel and her mother greeted everyone, Razzel sat down next to Wyatt.

"Watcha readin'?"

"Only the coolest comic book super hero of all time!" replied Wyatt, holding up his new treasure. "*Warrior Skull!*"

“What? *Warrior Skull*’s cool, but everyone knows *The Green Moonlight* is the coolest super hero ever,” explained Razzel. “*Warrior Skull* wouldn’t stand a chance against *Green Moonlight*’s cosmic—”

Wyatt abruptly stood up, changed his seat and continued reading his comic. Razzel folded her arms and huffed.

Just as Mrs. Krimble was about to reprimand her son for being rude, the birthday girl appeared, walking apprehensively down the stairs. Grandma Trisha was the first to notice her.

“Oh my, look at that sweet little angel.”

Willow was wearing a yellow dress with blue lace and a blue bow in her hair. Yellow and blue were Willow’s favorite colors. The moment her foot made contact with the landing, she ran straight toward her mother and wrapped her arms around her waiste.

“I don’t know, Mommy. I feel ... funny.” She peered down at her exposed prosthetic limb.

Razzel stood up and pointed to her own dress.

“Look at me, Willow. My mommy made *me* wear a funny dress too. We both look silly together.”

Mrs. Krimble and Mrs. Fiora exchanged smiles.

Razzel grabbed Willow by the hand and pulled her toward the couch.

“Come and open your present ... I made it myself.”

“Oh, not yet,” said Mrs. Krimble. “We’re waiting for one more guest to arrive.”

“Who else is coming?” asked Grandma Trisha.

“Well, this woman brought her daughter into the emergency room last week,” Mrs. Krimble explained. “I treated her for bumps and bruises. Fell down her basement steps, poor thing. I got to talking with the mother and it turns out they live just a few blocks away on Chincel Street. The little girl’s Willow’s age, so I thought she and Razzel could add a third member to their little crew. She should be here soon, although the mother can’t stay. She’s a hot-shot lawyer with a demanding schedule. Same goes for her husband. She kept nervously glancing at her watch the entire time I tended to her daughter in the ER.”

“A new friend sounds like a great idea,” added Mrs. Fiora. “Razzel doesn’t play well with anyone other than Willow. I hope they all hit it off.”

No sooner did Razzel give her mother a sneering look when the doorbell rang for a third time.

“Got it,” said Grandpa Theo. He opened the door to find a beautiful little girl with long, glistening jet-black hair, wearing a white gown, so elegant, she mirrored a flower girl in a wedding party. Alongside her was a large purple box almost as tall as she was. The little girl looked over her shoulder and waved to a car that was parked at the curb. The woman in the car didn’t even bother waving back; she simply sped off.

“Was that your mom?” asked Grandpa Theo.

The little girl gave a nod.

“Well, aren’t you a doll? Grandpa Theo leaned down to get a closer look at the new guest. “What’s your name, princess?”

The little girl looked up at Grandpa Theo apprehensively, looked back down at the floor and responded in a shy whisper... “Shayla.”

### **3 YEARS LATER...**

“Oh, no! My mother’s gonna freak!” Shayla shouted, attempting to shake the fresh mud off of her red silk dress.

“Lighten up, Shay,” said Razzel. “It’ll come out in the wash. No big deal. I keep tellin’ you to wear jeans. Those fancy dresses just get in the way of climbing. This is a tree house, not a doll house.”

“Let’s go inside and see if we can wash it off,” suggested Willow.

The three girls entered Willow’s laundry room through the back garage door.

“Hey Will, can I grab an iced tea?” asked Razzel, opening the mini fridge.

“That’s what they’re there for,” replied Willow. “My mom’s in the kitchen, Shayla. Quick, take off your dress and we’ll run it through the express-cycle.”

Shayla looked at Willow as if she was speaking a foreign language.

“Laundry, Princess!” Razzel exclaimed. “We’ll wash it and no one will know you got it dirty. Your mom’s not picking you up for another hour. That should be just enough time to wash it and throw it into the dryer.”

“How do you guys know all this stuff?” asked Shayla, removing her dress, suddenly standing in her underwear.

"I help my mom with the laundry all the time," replied Willow. "Don't you?"

Shayla looked quite discomfited for a few silent moments.

"Sasha takes care of that kind of stuff," she said finally.

"Sasha?" said Razzel. "Is that your cleaning lady?"

"Housekeeper," Shayla corrected.

"Well, excuse me, Your Majesty," said Razzel, with a curtsy. "Maybe tomorrow Sasha can serve us some tea and crumpets at your palace."

The three friends laughed until Willow noticed a huge purple oval mark on Shayla's outer left thigh.

"What's that," she asked, pointing to the injury.

Shayla's expression changed quite suddenly.

"Oh ... that's ... it's nothing. I fell."

"No offense, Shay, but you are quite the klutz," said Razzel just before taking a huge gulp of *Fisher's Almond Iced Tea*.

Willow surveyed Shayla suspiciously.

"You know, Shayla, we've been friends for three years now and every time you have a bruise or a scratch, it's caused by some fall that I've never seen."

“What’s that supposed to mean?” said Shayla, defensively.

Razzel looked puzzled.

“It’s just that I’ve seen your dad lose his temper really easily,” said Willow, cautiously. “You can tell us if he ever —”

“What?” replied Shayla, feigning confusion at Willow’s implication. She looked down at her bruise for a moment before turning her attention back to her friends. Suddenly, a feeling of great resentment surged through her; how dare Willow question her perfect family. What did *she* know about the stressful labors of a highly regarded lawyer? “Well ... your mom’s strict too, Willow. And ... and you...” —she pointed a quaking finger at Razzel—“...your parents are always reprimanding you for not listening!”

“My dad’s hard-core,” replied Razzel. “I get grounded whenever I step out of line, and let me tell you, it’s a very thin line. Hang on...” —she turned to Willow, pointing to Shayla’s bruise—“...you think her dad did this?” Willow didn’t answer; not with words.

“Whoa,” said Razzel, “I was swatted on my butt many-a-time when I was younger, but I was never beaten to the point of injury!”

Shayla didn’t speak. For a brief moment, she wanted to tell her friends everything: how her father beat her whenever he had a “rough day” at his office; how he hit her mother whenever she threatened to go to the police. She wanted her friends to help her ... to save her. But what if the monster at home found out?

“You don’t understand!” Shayla blurted, teetering on the brink of tears. “He ... he loves me. He’s just trying to teach me to be good.”

“At what,” said Razzel, “boxing?”

“What do *you* know?” Shayla retorted defensively. “Your parents aren’t strict enough if you ask me. Would it kill you to dress like a lady for a change?”

“I’m *not* a lady – I’m 10!” Razzel snapped back.

“Calm down, Raz,” Willow interjected. “Shayla, we’re just trying to help you. Maybe I can talk to my mom. Maybe she can—”

“No! You can’t tell anyone!”

“But we could help you if you just—”

“I don’t need your *help*, Willow!” Shayla began to shout. “Who do think you are – some great hero?” Shayla felt as if her two friends were judging her and her family with every stare. Her resentment quickly evolved into pure anger. “My dad loves me and ... and you’re just jealous because ... because your dad’s dead!”

**SPLASH!**

“RAZZEL!” Willow shouted.

“DON’T YOU *EVER* TALK TO HER LIKE THAT AGAIN!” roared a seething Razzel, holding an empty bottle of iced tea.

Shayla wore an appalled expression as she stood in her spot, iced tea dripping from her face. Willow handed her a towel. Shayla abruptly snatched it.

“Look at the two of you, preaching to me that my dad’s too violent when you can’t even control your *own* temper.”

“You’re right,” said Willow, turning toward Razzel. “That was uncalled for.”

“Was it?” replied Razzel. “There’s a difference between putting a brat in her place and beating your child to a bloody pulp for your own enjoyment.”

“You don’t know what it’s like in my house!” said Shayla, wiping more than iced tea from her eyes.

“Then tell us,” said Willow.

Shayla looked at Willow and Razzel for a silent moment. She then threw the towel onto the floor, grabbed her dirty dress off the washer and climbed back into it.

“I’m calling my mother! I want her to pick me up right now!”

“Come on, Shayla,” Willow pleaded, “we’re your friends.”

“If you’re my friends, then you’ll keep this to yourselves and never bring it up again.”

“How can you expect us to not bring it up?” asked Razzel. “There’s—”

“Nothing left to talk about,” Shayla cut in.

“Shay, look, I’m sorry,” said Razzel, placing her right hand on Shayla’s shoulder. “I shouldn’t have done that. Will’s right; we can help.”

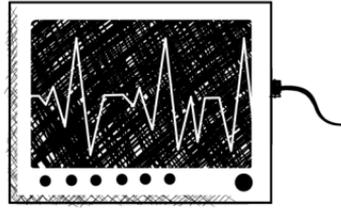
Shayla shrugged her shoulder, forcing Razzel to release it.

“I don’t need help from either of you! In fact, I don’t need anything from either of you — EVER AGAIN!”

## Chapter Thirteen

### Grandma Trisha's Secret

Present Day...



Willow and Mrs. Fiora ran to the elevator and took it to the fourth floor. They knew Grandma Trisha was in the *Intensive Care Unit*. When the doors opened, they followed the arrows to the *ICU*. They walked up to the desk and Willow recognized Nurse Frountner from their brief encounter on the staff elevator.

“Willow,” said nurse Frountner, his expression somber, “your family’s right through those doors.” He noticed Mrs. Fiora. “You’ll have to wait out here, Miss. Immediate family only.”

Mrs. Fiora nodded. She grabbed Willow by both shoulders.

“Good luck, sweetheart.”

Willow nodded and walked through the double doors. What she saw made her heart drop. Mrs. Krimble was sitting in a chair in the hall, crying hysterically, as Wyatt tried to console her.

“Mom!” said Willow, startling her family. “What happened?”

Mrs. Krimble stood up and tossed her arms around her daughter.

“Oh, Willow, I’m so sorry, Baby,” she said, tears streaming down her face, “Grandma’s ... she’s...” she couldn’t bring herself to say the words. Wyatt stood behind his mother, placing his hand on her shoulder.

Willow broke free from her mother’s embrace and peered into her eyes.

“Mom?” Willow’s expression was a blend of shock and confusion. “She’s not ... she can’t be!”

Mrs. Krimble shook her head side-to-side, placing her hand over her mouth, not wanting to release the words caught in her throat. Willow wasn’t certain if her mother was responding “No” to her question or did her headshake signify the worst?

“No, Baby...” Mrs. Krimble said finally, “...she’s not gone.”

Willow breathed a sigh of relief, but it was brief as her mother continued...

“She’s not gone *yet*, but there’s nothing more the doctors can do for her. She suffered a mild heart attack that

left her very weak.”

Willow was distraught.

“But if it was mild —”

“There’s more to it than that, Willow. Your grandmother ... well ... she...” Mrs. Krimble focused her attention toward the floor, not daring to look her daughter in the eye, “... she’s lived with chronic heart failure for over a year now and ... she made me promise not to tell you kids.”

After what seemed to Mrs. Krimble like an eternity of silence... “How could you keep this from us, Mom!” Willow’s tone was an amalgam of shock and anger. “Didn’t you think we had the right to know! We’re her grandchildren!”

“I know, Willow,” said Mrs. Krimble, placing her hand on Willow’s shoulder, forcing herself to see the anguish in her daughter’s eyes. “She didn’t want to upset you and she thought if she continued taking her medication and followed the right diet... People can live with heart failure for a long time and —”

Willow shrugged her mother’s hand off her shoulder. She was furious at both her mother and her grandmother. How could they not have told her? True, they

were unaware of her gift, but she still had the right to know if someone close to her was sick, especially after losing her father.

“I wanna see her!” Willow demanded.

Before Mrs. Krimble could respond, Dr. Flirsten stepped into the hall from a nearby room.

“I’m afraid that is out of the question,” he said, making notes to his clipboard. “I’ve stabilized her as best as I could and she is resting in a private room where we can still keep a close eye on her. I don’t want her getting too excited, so, for the moment, we will not be allowing any visitors. Perhaps in a little while—”

“I NEED TO SEE HER, NOW!” barked Willow. Mrs. Krimble was taken aback. She wasn’t used to seeing her daughter in this state. Even Wyatt looked a bit surprised.

“As I stated,” replied Dr. Flirsten, his condescending tone rearing its head, “you can not see her at the moment.”

“I need to see her before it’s too late.”

Dr. Flirsten directed his aloof expression toward the 13-year-old.

"I'm afraid it is already too late," he said. "Her condition is at *Stage D*, and heart failure brought on by hypertension at her age —"

"I'm not interested in your fancy medical terminology right now, Doctor!" Willow cut across Dr. Flirsten in a tone that made Mrs. Krimble uneasy. "I just want to see my grandmother!"

Dr. Flirsten's expression changed from indifferent to agitated. Who did this little girl think she was speaking to?

"The best thing for you to do now," he said, adjusting his glasses, "is let her rest a bit and then maybe —"

"— maybe? Maybe what? She's my grandmother and I *need* to see her!"

Dr. Flirsten could not help himself; he rolled his eyes before responding.

"See here, young lady, I think I am a bit more qualified to know what is best for my patient and I'm telling you —"

"Your *patient*?" Willow interrupted. "Your *patient* happens to be my *family* — my blood — and I think I am a bit more qualified to know what's best for her seeing as I have known her my entire life!"

“Willow!” Mrs. Krimble snapped at her daughter. “What’s gotten into you? I know you’re upset, but you can’t—”

“I need to see Grams right away, Mom!” Willow insisted. She considered, for a moment, telling her mother the truth about her gift. If it was the only way for her to see her grandmother ... to save her...

“For your information, young lady,” Dr. Flirsten addressed Willow before her mother could respond, the arrogance in his tone elevated, “your grandmother left me strict instructions not to allow any family member into her room; she does not wish to upset anyone. However, seeing as you will not listen to reason, you’ve got five minutes. She needs to rest!”

“Thank you, Doctor” said Mrs. Krimble.

Without another word, Willow brushed passed Dr. Flirsten as she rushed into the room he had emerged from earlier.

Once in the center of the room, Willow drew back the curtain before her, revealing a withered looking Grandma Trisha, lying in a bed, connected to several machines monitoring her. Her eyes were shut and her breathing was slow, but steady.

*It's better that she's asleep.*

Willow could heal her grandmother and no one, including Grandma Trisha, would be aware of it. Willow reached for her grandmother's limp hand when suddenly...

"NO!"

Willow was startled by her grandmother's sudden plea.

"Grams?"

"Willow..." Grandma Trisha muttered as she tried to nudge herself up on her bed. Willow watched her struggle and motioned to help her. "No, Willow!"

Willow retracted, shocked by her grandmother's curt-ness.

Grandma Trisha managed to pull herself up into a semi-sitting position.

"Willow, you shouldn't be here."

"I needed to see you, Grams. I need to ... help you," Willow reached for her grandmother's hand and, once again, Grandma Trisha recoiled.

"Willow, please ... you mustn't."

Willow looked stunned.

"Grams?"

“Yes, Willow ... I know. I know what you can do. I knew if I told you I was sick, you would try to save me.”

“How do you ... Why don't you want—”

“Oh, dear Willow. You are so deserving of what you possess. You've always been so selfless. I need you to be selfless now. Please ... let me go.”

Willow was unnerved by her grandmother's dialogue. Why would she not want to be saved? Didn't she want to witness her granddaughter grow into a woman ... attend her college graduation ... her wedding...

“But I can make you better, Grams,” Willow pleaded. “You can go home tomorrow. You can—”

“Go home to what, Willow? A large empty house? No ... It's time.”

“You can come live with us. Mom's been asking you for years. You can have *my* room; I'll move to the guest room.”

Grandma Trisha beamed at her granddaughter.

“This is why you mean the world to me, Willow, but I miss your grandfather. My life hasn't been whole since he passed. I was shattered the day I got that call from the hospital. I may not let on, but I find myself thinking

of him in the simplest tasks I perform.”

Grandma Trisha turned her head away from Willow as she continued to speak, staring up at the ceiling.

“The lives we built together ... the children we brought into this world ... the places we traveled... It’s all but a faded memory whenever I look at his photograph.” She took a deep breath, exhaled and turned to face her granddaughter once again.

“I’m old, Willow, in case you hadn’t noticed. But 88 years on this earth was a good run. When I found out I was sick last year, it was almost a relief. I can go now because I’ve had a full life. My time is done here, don’t you see? There’s nothing left for me.”

“How can you say that? What about your family? What about me?”

Grandma Trisha smiled. She instinctively reached out to touch her granddaughter’s face, but suddenly withdrew her hand.

“You don’t need me, Willow. Look at you; you never let that leg stop you from doing anything. You lost your father when you were so young, and still you have remained so strong. Your mother could never run that house without you.”

“God knows I love all of my grandchildren, but that brother of yours is no help at all; sweet boy, but lazy as they come. Thank goodness he and your mother have you, and I’ve known for a long time that you’re—”

“—just a kid! A kid who needs her grandmother. Grams ... please ... don’t do this to me.”

“You’re strong, Willow, stronger than any woman I’ve ever known. Stronger than *I’ve* ever been. I have no fears about leaving you now. You’ve grown into a fine young lady, and soon you’ll be an amazing woman. And I leave you with Razzel; oh how I adore that girl. Never lose her, Willow. You two are opposites, which is why you need each other. With her around, I know you’ll always have someone to lean on, learn from, (Grandma Trisha smiled) and teach.”

Willow broke down; it was all too much for her.

“Oh come now,” Grandma Trisha tried to comfort. “This is a happy day, a joyous day. I get to join your grandfather and your father, knowing you are in good hands. We’ll always watch over you. You know that.”

Willow shook her head as tears slowly streamed down her freckled cheeks.

“It won’t be the same, Grams. Please...”

Grandma Trisha's expression changed; for a moment she looked like her old stern self.

"Willow Krimble, don't you dare prove me wrong! You have always put others before yourself and your dear old grandmother is asking you to do this one final thing for her. Can you do this for me, Willow? Can you let me go?"

Willow peered into her grandmother's eyes. Grandma Trisha smiled at her and Willow suddenly understood. In all of the time she had been sharing her gift with those in need, she had never realized ... not everyone wants to be saved. She knew she could reach out and touch her grandmother without anyone stopping her, but she wouldn't. She did not have to agree with her grandmother's decision, but she would respect it. She took one step back, giving her grandmother a slow nod, not bothering to wipe the stream of tears cascading down her face.

"Thank you, Willow. I won't ask you to take care of your mother because I know I don't need to."

Willow nodded once more.

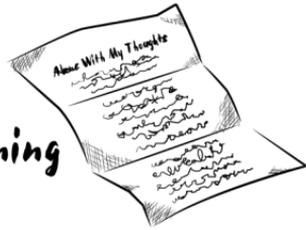
"I really should rest now, dear." Grandma Trisha edged her way back to a lying position. She closed her

eyes before saying one final thing to her granddaughter... "You'll be hearing from me soon, Willow."

Willow watched as her grandmother's chest slowly rose up and down, each breath getting deeper and longer. After a few more agonizing moments of counting the seconds between each breath, Willow watched Grandma Trisha's heart monitor go flat-line as her chest ceased to rise. Willow shook her head and was overcome with emotion. Disregarding the promise she made moments earlier, she flung herself onto her grandmother and held her tightly. She kissed her forehead, oblivious to the Stratlin Medical personnel who had flooded the room. At that moment, Willow received the answer to a question she had been asking herself for a long time: yes, she could heal others ... but once they had passed, she could not bring them back.

## Chapter Fourteen

### An Ending And A Beginning



The funeral parlor was extremely crowded. Mrs. Krimble's sister, Klisa, her husband, Norman, their 18-year-old son, Stan and 16-year-old daughter, Veronica, had flown in from Seattle to pay their respects. They sat in the front of the room with Mrs. Krimble and Wyatt, across from the closed coffin, as people lined up to offer their condolences. Willow decided not to sit in the front with her family, but chose to stand closer to the entrance, toward the rear of the room. She was upset enough without being, as Razzel had so eloquently put it, *"a car at the end of a sob-train."*

"I'm running out of places to stand," said Razzel as people brushed past her to get to Willow.

"Grams touched a lot of people," replied Willow.

"Look who just walked in," said Razzel.

Willow turned her attention to the entranceway and spotted Taren and Brent. Brent was the first to throw his arms around her.

"I'm so sorry, Willow," he said. Taren followed his lead, her somber expression uncharacteristic of her usual exuberance.

"Thanks, guys," said Willow. "By the way, Brent, congrats. I can't believe you took second place in the talent show."

"He was incredible," Taren perked up. "He performed a routine that infused both tap and ballet. Kids at school are calling him '*Lord Of The Prance*.'"

"There's a title to be proud of," Razzel mumbled to Willow, turning away from Brent.

"On top of that," Taren continued, "Annabelle Spreeman asked him out on a date. Said she was very impressed by his 'passion for dance.'"

"S'that true?" asked Razzel, completely stunned. Annabelle Spreeman was no Shayla Stergus, but she was definitely one of the prettiest girls in Ginkelman.

"What can I say," replied Brent, modestly, "the ladies love a guy in leotard and tap shoes."

Willow and Razzel gave one another odd stares, neither of them knowing exactly how to respond.

"We'd better get out of the way," said Taren to Brent. "We'll catch up later. Let's go see Mrs. Krimble."

“Right,” Brent agreed. “If you need anything at all, Willow, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Thanks for coming, guys.”

Taren and Brent made their way to the front to pay their respects to Mrs. Krimble and the rest of Willow’s family.

“*Lord Of The Prance*, huh?” Willow whispered to Razzel.

“Trust me, Will, I’ve seen a lot of horror movies in my day, but visions of Brent in that outfit...” Razzel shuddered, “...I’m *still* having nightmares!”

Leave it to Razzel to make Willow want to chuckle even in the most distressing of times.

As Willow shook her head at Razzel, she suddenly spotted a figure darting toward her. She could not raise her arms fast enough as Carlo Sprunco grabbed hold of her and squeezed. After a few painful seconds, he relinquished his embrace and grabbed Willow’s right hand.

“We joosta hadda espresso a few week ago, me and Nonna Treesh,” Mr. Sprunco sobbed. He patted Willow on her hand and walked away weeping into his palms.

As Willow watched Mr. Sprunco make his way to the front of the crowded room, Razzel received an emotional jolt as she spotted an unforeseen guest in the entranceway.

“What’s *she* doing here?”

Willow turned around to find Shayla Stergus standing beneath the exit sign, resembling a lost child, looking for anyone she could recognize. She spotted Willow and Razzel and cautiously made her way toward them, bumping into no less than three people in the packed room.

She reached her destination, but before she could open her mouth...

“What are *you* doing here?” The volume in Razzel’s voice may have been low, but the tone of disgust was quite lucid.

“I ... I came to pay my respects.”

“Since when did *you* have any respect for anyone? For years, we’ve tried —”

“Raz!” Willow interrupted her best friend’s potential rant. “It’s okay. Just give us a minute.”

Razzel surveyed Shayla with daggers.

“I’ll be right over there if you need me,” she said,

walking away, never taking her eyes off Shayla.

As soon as Razzel was out of earshot, Shayla turned to Willow.

“Willow, I’m really sorry about your grandmother.”

“Thanks, Shayla, I appreciate you coming. It means a lot.” After an awkward moment of silence... “Look, about the other day, I—”

“—saved my life,” Shayla interrupted. “In more ways than you think.”

Willow’s eyes darted around the crowded room, making certain no one was eavesdropping. Everyone seemed to be engrossed in their own conversations, and no one was in line to speak with her at the moment.

Mindful of Willow’s anxiety, Shayla lowered her voice to a whisper.

“I wanted you to know exactly what you did for me in that parking lot.”

Willow said nothing; she merely raised her eyebrows, urging Shayla to continue.

“When I was lying there, on that cold concrete, all I could think was, *what a waste my life has been.*”

“Shayla, that’s crazy. Your life hasn’t—”

“Yes, it has. For years I’ve tried to please the wrong

people, craving attention from those who could care less about me, pushing away friends that were actually concerned for me, but I couldn't see it. Take my dad; he never made any time for me. He was always so busy with his career, preoccupied with money and power, and all I ever wanted from him was a father. He never paid me any mind unless it was to..." Shayla paused and directed her eyes toward the floor. "Well, of course you know the kind of attention he gave me."

Willow said nothing. There were dozens of different conversations going on all around her, but at that moment, it was as if she and Shayla were the only ones in the room.

"My mother tried to protect me when she could," Shayla continued, "but that just fueled the monster and he..." Shayla looked up at Willow again. "Can you believe that I was actually considering going to live with that jerk?"

Willow looked surprised, but remained silent. She had heard through the school gossip-mill how Shayla's parents had gotten divorced last year, but she didn't know any of the details.

"He called me up and told me he missed me and

wanted to make things up to me; *'Make up for lost time.'* My mother's been so busy with *her* career that I thought I might go to Orlando for a while to be with my so-called father. That big house my mother and I live in is always so empty; it's just me and the housekeeper. Sure, Snella stops by (Willow almost cringed at the name), but she just likes to borrow my clothes and sit in my Jacuzzi. Her favorite topic of conversation is herself. That gets pretty boring after a while, so I was basically going to go to Florida to beg for my dad's attention." She shook her head. "Pathetic."

Willow saw the somber look in Shayla's eyes and knew it was her turn to speak.

"You've got so much going for you, Shayla, can't you see that? You don't need to impress anyone. If someone doesn't like you for you, they'll just have to miss out."

"That's just it, Willow. When I said you saved my life, I meant you saved me from ... myself – Miss *Popular with all the wrong people*. If someone like you, who I turned my back on and treated like dirt for years, can still help me... I'm done trying to get the wrong people's attention. I just hope you meant what you said."

Willow wasn't certain what Shayla was referring to

and looked at her inquisitively. Shayla decided to jog her memory.

“You said we could start over.”

Willow grinned.

“I always mean what I say, Shayla. *You* should know that.”

Shayla looked relieved.

“I don’t expect you to forget the way I treated you the past few years, but I just want the chance to make it up to you.”

“You being here’s a pretty good start.”

Shayla beamed.

“I just hope others can forgive me.” Shayla looked over in Razzel’s direction. She was standing 10 feet away, speaking to Taren and Brent.

“Don’t worry about Raz,” said Willow, “she’ll come around. Just give her some time.”

“I don’t know if she’ll ever forgive me, but I promise I’ll do my best to —”

“Just be yourself, Shayla. Don’t try to impress Razzel; she won’t respect you if you’re phony.”

“I’m doing it again, aren’t I?”

“You’ll get there. We just need to find that little girl

who used to have burping contests with us in my garage.”

Shayla chuckled for a moment and then suddenly looked serious again. “There’s someone else who I hope will be as forgiving as you...”

Willow looked puzzled. With all of the students Shayla had alienated, she needed to be a bit more specific.

“Davis,” said Shayla.

“What do you mean?”

Shayla’s gaze shifted to the floor once again.

“He’s great, but I haven’t been very fair to him either. I ... I only went out with him because ... well, all of the other girls in school are attracted to him. He is, after all, the cutest guy in Ginkelman.”

“He sure is,” Willow was too quick to agree.

“He’s probably also the sweetest,” Shayla continued, “but the truth is, he just isn’t my type.”

“Not your type?” said Willow, shocked. She always saw Davis Sweeney as every girl’s type: smart, funny, adorable and (above all else) not full of himself.

“I know, I know. I sound crazy, but there’s just no spark there.”

“Anyway, I’m way too young for a boyfriend; I think I’ll just try being a kid for a while.”

“That sounds like a great idea ... Shay.”

Shayla looked up once again and smiled. “Well, I’ve hogged you long enough.”

Shayla could see a small line forming several feet away with people who, no doubt, were waiting to see Willow.

“I’ll see you back at school, Willow. And don’t worry about your, uh ... unique skill. If it’s one thing I’m good at, it’s keeping things inside.”

“Thanks again for coming, Shayla,” Willow leaned forward, threw her arms around Shayla and embraced her. At first, Shayla was limp. She then closed her eyes, slowly raised her arms, wrapped them around Willow and squeezed so hard, Willow almost let out a gasp. The two separated and did not say another word to one another.

Razzel noticed Shayla taking a seat, wiping her eyes, but made no move to approach her. She was about to rejoin Willow when a booming voice called out to everyone in the room:

“May I have your attention please, everyone?” Father

Strauburn called out over the large crowd. "If everyone would kindly take their seats, I would like to say a little prayer for our dearly departed sister."

Willow took her seat in the front row with her family as everyone behind her scrambled to grab a chair. Razzel, Brent and Taren were fortunate enough to grab three seats next to Razzel's parents. Some people gave up the search and accepted their fate of having to stand in the back of the packed room.

"I can stand up here and go on and on about our departed sister Trisha," Father Strauburn began, "but, truth be told, I did not know her as well as some of you. Before we begin our prayers, I would like to invite any family member or friend to come up and share a few words about our beloved Trisha."

The room seemed to fall silent. Mrs. Krimble was beside herself with tears as her sister, Klisa, did her best to console her, while she herself was weeping mess.

The room suddenly flooded with murmurs as Willow stood up and walked to the podium. Father Strauburn gave her a nod as he stepped aside. The whispers around the room grew louder. Willow heard someone mutter, "*but she's just a kid.*"

Willow cleared her throat.

“Hello everyone, and thanks for coming.” Everyone was now at full attention; even Mrs. Krimble took a break from her crying when she heard the sound of her daughter’s voice.

“I know this day is hard on everyone,” Willow continued. “Grams was certainly one-of-a-kind.” Different faces throughout the room nodded in agreement. “No one is sadder to see her go than me. Some people have grandparents that they see a few times a year — at holidays and birthdays. That wasn’t the case with Grams. She tried to spend as much time with her family as she could. She wasn’t just my grandmother; she was a dear friend, and what I will miss most about our friendship is her honesty. She told it like it was, whether you wanted to hear it or not.”

Willow could see several people smile in agreement, and one woman in the back even snorted to stifle a chortle.

“It was her honesty that helped shape me to be, not only who I am, but who I hope to become.”

Willow pulled out a folded piece of paper from her skirt pocket and unfolded it onto the podium.

“I had this assignment in English class this semester where I was supposed to write a poem about anything that was important to me. I know that I couldn’t have written this if Grandma Trisha wasn’t a huge part of my life, and I certainly wouldn’t have the courage to read it in front of all of you.” Willow cleared her throat once more. “This poem is titled: *Alone With My Thoughts*.”

Silence flooded the room as Willow began to read from the folded printout before her:

*Inside my room, with clutter around,  
Alone with my thoughts that seem to surround  
My dreams, my hope, my love, my hate;  
They force my fears to permeate.  
I wonder whether I can't or could,  
I wonder if I shouldn't or should,  
I can't decide if maybe or not,  
I like it a little or hate it a lot.  
My thoughts consume me, as I try to decide,  
To explore what's outside or just run and hide.  
Should I scale a tall alp, dive into the snow,  
Or hide beneath covers where no one would know  
My thoughts claim that my freedom's forbidden.  
They frighten and warn me to always stay hidden.*

*The bright light outside can turn to dark dread,  
But I'll always be safe inside my own head.  
Why take a risk or play something new,  
When playing it safe is so easy to do.  
My mind races, filled with ignorant doubt,  
I may never be able to find my way out  
Of the pool in my head that keeps pulling me down.  
If I don't get out now, I may as well drown.  
Then, I'll never experience what may happen next  
To my story untold in unwritten text.  
Will my brother achieve all of his goals;  
Will my mom touch the life of another poor soul;  
Will my best friend find joy in a world filled with taunt;  
Will my grandmother find peace at the close of her jaunt?  
For them, I must struggle and fight to come out,  
I'll push aside fear, anxiety and doubt.  
I'll no longer dwell on what may or may not;  
I won't hide in my head to fester and rot.  
I'll lean on the shoulders of each friend and kin,  
I'll tell all my thoughts, "I'm not coming in."  
I'll no longer fear what may happen soon,  
As I leave all the clutter behind in my room.  
Inside my head is where fears shall remain.  
For now, I must leave them to dance in the rain.*

The room was silent for a moment. Razzel had to sit on her hands to prevent herself from applauding, knowing it would be inappropriate. She was thrilled when Willow glanced her way so she could give her an approving nod.

Willow heard whispers break out again and the same voice moments earlier that referred to her as *"just a kid"* was now mumbling, *"how old is she again?"*

Willow continued to ignore the mumbles and muttering.

"I'm able to say goodbye to Grams because I know she had no regrets in her life since she lived it to the fullest. She loved her friends and family. Anyone can see that by looking around this room. She taught me that if you surround yourself with people that care about you and people that you care about, then you are never truly alone, even when those people leave us. Thank you everyone."

Willow stepped down from the podium where Mrs. Krimble grabbed her and squeezed her tightly without a word ... and without a single tear.

## Chapter Fifteen A Brief Reunion



It had been a week since Grandma Trisha's death. The Krimble home was back to its serene state now that Willow was no longer sharing a bathroom with her teenage cousins. Aunt Klisa and her family had flown back to Seattle, shortly after she and Mrs. Krimble settled Grandma Trisha's estate.

Today was the final day Willow took off from school for mourning. Razzel promised to stop by with tonight's homework assignments from all of Willow's classes as she had done for the past several days.

It was 4:15pm when Wyatt answered the door, holding a foot-long submarine sandwich, to find Razzel scoffing at him.

"Are you ever *not* eating?" asked Razzel, walking into the living room, setting down her backpack, removing her heavy coat.

"Snack-time," Wyatt defended himself as he took a

huge bite from his turkey and swiss hero.

“Let me rephrase...” said Razzel, “...Is it ever *not* ‘snack-time’?”

“You know, Raz,” said Wyatt, inadvertently spitting bits of bread onto Razzel’s shirt, “you can be verbally abusive sometimes. Don’t let my big athletic stature fool you; I have feelings too, you know. You need to soften your tone.”

“What I *need* is an umbrella,” Razzel snapped back, brushing bits of sandwich off her long sleeve t-shirt. Wyatt suddenly recognized the character on Razzel’s shirt as she continued to scan it for sandwich crumbs.

“*Queen Fury?*” said Wyatt. “Sweet shirt! Where’d you get it?”

“At the Mall – Crazy Couture.”

“Do they have *Warrior Skull* shirts?”

“Nah, they only have woman’s clothes, but I saw some cool comic-book T’s in Garment Grabbers. You might find *Warrior Skull* there.”

“Sweet! Thanks. Go on up; they’re in Willow’s room.” Wyatt made another huge dent in his sandwich. “Chiklets McFarkus! I forgot the peanut butter! Later, Raz.”

As Wyatt sprinted to the kitchen, muttering something about “jalapeno peppers”, Razzel became puzzled. “*They’re* upstairs?” Did he mean Willow and Mrs. Krimble?

Razzel jogged up the stairs and was about to open the door to Willow’s bedroom when she heard two voices resonating from it. One of them was Willow’s, but the other stopped Razzel dead in her tracks. She stood in the hallway and listened:

“I can’t believe you still have this thing,” said the familiar voice. “Aren’t you a little old to be playing with dollhouses?”

“Haven’t you ever heard of sentimental value?” said Willow.

Razzel was livid. She flung open the door to Willow’s bedroom to find Shayla standing over a Molly Make-over dollhouse on Willow’s dresser.

“How could you, Will! “Razzel sneered. “I thought you were so much smarter than this! You let her walk all over you for years and now, all of a sudden, we’re supposed to just forget about everything?”

“Raz, we—”

“We’re supposed to forget about the insults...” Razzel

continued her rant, "...the backstabbing, the rumor spreading... Shall I go on?"

"Will you let me talk?" Willow insisted.

"I can't think of a damn thing you can say that would erase the years of abuse we had to endure from Her Majesty and her royal subjects!"

Shayla tried to speak, but she couldn't. She wanted to apologize; to tell Razzel how jealous she was of both her and Willow, which caused her to treat them with resentment for the past three years. But how do you reason with someone who is brimming with such anger toward you? She opened her mouth to speak, but Razzel's livid expression forced Shayla to flee Willow's room, ashamed and defeated.

Willow called out to Shayla, but to no avail. She thought about going after her, but decided to confront Razzel.

"There!" said Willow. "Are you happy with yourself?"

"Quite proud, thank you," replied Razzel, folding her arms across her chest.

“You always do that, Raz! You always fly off the handle. She made some mistakes. Neither of us are perfect. She needs us.”

“She needs us? For what? To have someone to embarrass in front of the entire school auditorium?”

“That was Snella,” replied Willow.

“What difference does it make? If Snella were here, you’d probably give *her* a hug.”

“WHAT!”

“You heard me!” replied Razzel. “Willow Krimble: The girl who wants to fill the world with sunshine, rainbows and puppies. Well, here’s a newsflash, Will: Not everyone in this world has good in them. There are lots of bad people out there, and I’m not gonna shake their hand because, one day, they decide they’re done knocking me down! You’re so freakin’ naive sometimes, you know that? You let people step all over you, then you apologize for getting their shoes all dirty. Why don’t you wake up!”

Willow looked at her so-called best friend and her insides seemed to tighten at the sight of her.

“Well, I’m sorry that I don’t wanna beat the hell out of everything that crosses my path!” retorted Willow. “I

wanna fill the world with puppies? You'd kick one down the stairs if it looked at you the wrong way!"

Razzel took several steps toward Willow until they were face-to-face.

"If someone gets in my way, I move 'em. You should try it sometime, instead of always making excuses for people."

"Like the way I always make excuses for you?" replied Willow, her tone venomous.

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" said Razzel, backing up a step.

"For years I've disagreed with the way you do certain things, but I still —"

"Like what!" spat Razzel.

"Hmm, lets see ... like always having to have the final word... Like never letting anything slide by without making a snide comment... Like constantly losing your temper before even knowing all of the facts, or, how about this one: never forgiving someone for their mistakes!"

"Well ... sounds like I've just been a burden to you all these years," replied Razzel. "I guess you just hung out with me because you felt sorry for me. That's what you

do best, isn't it — take pity on others? *'Look at mean ol' Razzel ... I'd better help her manage that anger. I'll bet she needs me to turn her frown upside down,'* Razzel mocked in a childish tone and an exaggerated pout.

Willow was furious. For the first time in her life, she wanted to hurt Razzel. Not physically, but there was another way...

"You know, Raz, before Grams died, she mentioned you."

Razzel's fake pout transformed into a curious expression.

"She said that you and I needed each other."

Razzel rolled her eyes. Leave it to Willow to turn an argument into a sentimental moment. Razzel grinned and shook her head, signifying, what she thought to be, the end of their blowout. But then Willow finished her thought...

"Grams was wrong about that; I can't see any good coming out of having you in my life."

Razzel was wounded; Willow had caught her off guard. For the first time in her life, Razzel Fiora was speechless. No snappy quip, no sarcastic insult; not even a sneering look. She turned around abruptly and

darted for the door. Just as she was about to leave, she paused and turned to Willow one final time.

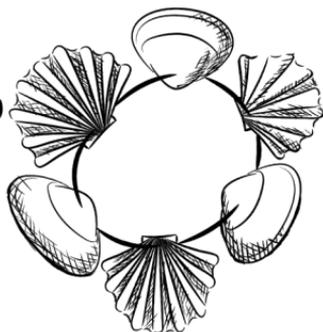
“I don’t know why you feel it’s your responsibility to take care of everyone around you,” she said. “At least now ... you’ll have one less person to worry about.” Razzel slammed Willow’s door shut as she exited the bedroom.

Willow let out a sigh of deep frustration as she plunked down onto her bed. She grabbed the photo of her father from her nightstand. Resting her head against her pillow, she held the framed photo in front her, staring at it as she allowed a distant memory to drift over her...

# Chapter Sixteen

## The Promise

Six Years Earlier...



Willow had a great time at her seventh birthday party and loved all of her gifts. Razzel had given her a friendship bracelet she made out of tiny seashells, which she and her mother painted a variety of bright colors. Wyatt gave his sister a box of chocolate truffles, which he ate half of as soon as the box was opened. Grandma Trisha and Grandpa Theo gave Willow a \$100 gift certificate to Bobo's Toy Kingdom, while her parents had given her a thick book containing a collection of children's poetry, complete with color illustrations. Wyatt thought it was *"the most boring gift ever"* and begged his parents not to give him the same thing for his birthday. Willow, on the other hand, loved it. Even before she could read, she would spend hours sifting through her books, making up her own stories to go along with the images before

her.

When the last guest departed for the evening, Mrs. Krimble volunteered Wyatt to help her clean up in the kitchen. He was less than thrilled.

Only Willow and her father remained in the living room. Roger Krimble observed his daughter from his lounge chair, watching her carefully examine each of her gifts until she decided to devote her full attention to one in particular.

“So,” said Mr. Krimble, “you made a new friend today?”

“Yep.”

“She seems very nice. A bit shy, but maybe you and Razzel could help bring her out of her shell.”

“Yep,” repeated Willow, preoccupied with the deluxe Molly Makeover dollhouse Shayla had given her.

“Willow, Honey, can you come over here for a minute?”

Willow huffed. She was disappointed that her playtime was being placed on hold, but complied with her father’s request. She ran over to Mr. Krimble and hopped onto his frail lap. He winced, but did not complain.

“What’s up, Doc?” said Willow with a smirk. She and her father always watched cartoons together and loved to quote them.

“Did you have fun today, Baby Girl?”

“Yep.”

Mr. Krimble smiled. Willow automatically poked his dimples with her index fingers, as she always did when her father smiled. This time, however, his face was so gaunt, it was almost difficult to find the dimples that used to dent into once-plump cheeks.

“Is that all you can say is, ‘yep’?”

Willow smiled playfully and paused for a moment, her index finger now on her chin.

“Yep,” she giggled out.

Mr. Krimble smiled for a moment, but suddenly appeared quite serious. He had recently decided that he would not hide his inevitable fate from his children. Until now, Mr. and Mrs. Krimble told their children “*Daddy is very sick.*” But Mr. Krimble wanted Wyatt and Willow to know exactly what to expect. Observing his daughter at play, he decided that she should know what was coming, sooner rather than later, as it could happen on any given day. He did not want his children

to be taken by surprise. He wasn't certain how Wyatt or Willow would react to the news and decided to speak with each of them individually.

"Willow, you know for your next birthday, I ... I may not be here."

"Where you going, Daddy?"

"Daddy has to ... well, Willow, you know when we go to church and the priest talks about Heaven?"

"Uh, huh."

"Well, pretty soon, Daddy's going to go to Heaven, but the thing is, Honey, when someone goes to heaven, they need to ... stay there."

Willow looked perplexed, her index finger still placed firmly on her chin. Mr. Krimble could see the wheels spinning in his daughter's mind through her seven-year-old eyes.

"To be with Jesus?" she said.

"Yes, Honey, that's right, which is why I need you to look after your mother and brother for me. They're going to need someone like you. So while I'm up there, (he pointed upwards) I want *you* to take care of everyone down here. Can you do that for me, Willow?"

Willow mulled over her father's request for a moment.

"But, I don't want you to go, Daddy."

"Willow, I ... look, I know it's going to be difficult for you, but sometimes we have to deal with things that are out of our control. Daddy *has* to go and I'll feel a lot better knowing that you're looking after everyone when I'm gone. It's a huge responsibility I'm giving you, but I know you can handle it. I need you to be strong, Willow. What do you say?"

Willow gazed into her father's eyes for a moment before giving him her final reply.

"Okay, Daddy. I'll look after everyone for you. I'm sure it'll be a long time before you have to leave. I mean my next birthday is soooo far away." Willow hopped off her father's lap and grabbed the bracelet Razzel had made for her. She gently placed it around her little wrist and examined it closely. She flashed it in front of her father and smiled at him, showing off her new trinkets.

Roger Krimble looked at his daughter and smiled as he fought, with every fiber of his frail being, to restrain his tears.

# Chapter Seventeen

## Snella's Decision

Present Day...



Willow's return to school was awkward, as she avoided all contact with Razzel. Razzel gladly reciprocated. Neither girl found it difficult to ignore the other, even when seated only a few feet apart.

Willow spent every lunch period in the library, catching up on some of the assignments she'd missed. Whenever Taren or Brent approached either Willow or Razzel about their fallout, neither girl was eager to discuss it.

Willow had spoken to Shayla on the phone on the evening Shayla retreated from Willow's room, a victim of Razzel's rage. But Shayla was convinced the three of them would never be friends the way they used to be. Not wishing to make things worse between Willow and Razzel, Shayla kept her distance when the three of them shared a class. She tried to convince Willow to patch things up with Razzel and felt guilty about being the

cause of their argument, but Willow insisted Razzel make the first move.

In the mean time, Snella, Carmen and Fusia were none too pleased when Shayla so much as smiled at Willow. They couldn't understand what could have caused such a dramatic alteration in Shayla's behavior, for her to no longer segregate herself to the suitably dubbed "*accepted*" crowd in school.

Rather than approach Shayla about her new outlook, Snella decided to corner Willow in the girls' bathroom at the end of the school week. As Willow was drying her hands, her peripheral vision made out the forms of three figures standing in the doorway.

"I didn't think you knew how to use soap, Krimble," Snella taunted as Carmen and Fusia stood on either side of her, their arms crossed, wearing designer blouses and simple grins.

Willow rolled her eyes and shook her head in complete frustration as the three drama-queens continued to block her exit.

"I've got a bus to catch..." said Willow, drying her hands, "...I really don't have time for this."

"Now, now, Krimble," replied Snella, "surely you

have a moment to discuss a mutual acquaintance.”

Willow had a feeling where this was headed.

“What is it?” she asked, exasperated.

“Well, it seems that Shayla is under the impression that she needs to change certain aspects of her life. Not sure where this born-again attitude hatched from, nor do I care.”

“Nor?” said Willow. “Have you been reading the dictionary again, Snella?”

“All I know is,” – the volume of Snella’s tone seemed to be rising – “she doesn’t need to be seen with trash like you!”

“Hmm...” Willow pretended to ponder something, placing her index finger on her chin as her pupils rotated toward the ceiling. “I think she’s a big girl and can decide for herself who she wants to...” – Willow’s eyes scanned her harassers – “...be friends with.”

Snella moved in closer. Willow didn’t flinch.

“Listen up, Prosthetic Princess,” barked Snella as her peanut-gallery giggled in support, “I know her better than anyone and I –”

“That’s where you’re wrong!” Willow cut in. “You actually don’t know her at all. Now get out of my way!”

Snella took one more step toward Willow, leaving a mere 10 inches between them.

“Or what?” said Snella. “Your body-guard isn’t here to protect you this time, is she? From what I hear, the two of you need couples’ counseling. Pity ... you were so cute together. Who’s bargain-bin jeans will you borrow now?”

Willow felt a surge of anger flow through her. She didn’t say a word, but stared Snella down without blinking, her face filled with rage.

Snella had expected Willow to recoil. She was shocked to see Willow standing her ground with an expression that was quite intimidating. This was not the timid little girl she tripped at the beginning of the school year.

“Just stay away from Shayla,” Snella warned, “unless you want to have another...” – she made quote marks with her fingers – “...accident.”

The tense moment was broken by the bathroom door swinging open. Shayla entered and took in the scene. Based on Willow’s expression, it was clear this was not a friendly exchange.

“What’s going on?”

Snella took several steps back.

“Just having a chat with our ... friend here,” she said. “But I think we understand each other now ... don’t we, Krimble?”

Snella’s sadistic grin only fueled Willow’s fury. She was tired of people telling her who she could and could not be friends with. Snella had expected her to storm away in tears by now. Not this time.

“It would seem,” said Willow, turning her attention to Shayla, “your so-called friends here think they can intimidate me into not speaking to you anymore.” She turned her attention back to Snella. “We wouldn’t wanna damage your reputation now, would we?”

“This true?” Shayla asked the three debutantes.

As usual, Carmen and Fusia answered with blank stares. Snella, on the other hand, was a bit more vocal.

“Oh, come off it, Shayla. Wake up and smell the caramel latte. You know how it works. We don’t associate with the likes of...” –Snella scanned Willow up and down with her index finger – “...*this!*”

“With the likes of *this?*” mimicked Shayla. “The likes of what? Someone who actually gives a damn about the people she hangs out with? Someone who doesn’t use

her friends to gain points in the popularity poll?"

Snella tried to speak, but Shayla cut her off.

"With the likes of *this*?" Shayla repeated, pointing to Willow, taking a step towards Snella. "If I were lying in the school parking lot, dying, what would *you* do?"

Again, Snella opened her mouth, but Shayla was too quick for her.

"You'd probably check your watch and count down the seconds before you could claim my Louis Vuitton bag for yourself."

"Shayla, I—"

"Decide right now, Snella. Make a choice. This also goes for the two of you!" Shayla addressed Carmen and Fusia, who were dumbstruck by her behavior. "We can all be friends no matter what our clothing labels say, and it doesn't end with Willow either. There's no reason why we can't talk to whoever roams the halls in this school, no matter what their parents pull in at bonus time, or ... you can remain the way you are: a pathetic clique that tries to outdo one another in order to maintain some ridiculous social status which, once we leave this school, no one will remember anyway!"

Shayla surveyed her opposition.

“So ... what’s it gonna be?”

Snella turned to Carmen and Fusia to read their reactions. She stared at them for a moment before nodding. They both nodded back. Snella turned her attention back to Shayla.

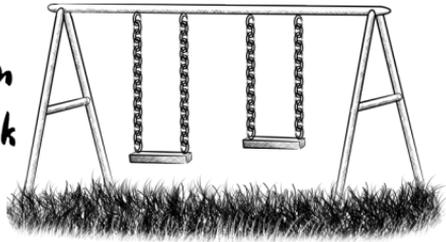
“Shayla Stergus,” she snarled, “from this point on, I’m gonna do everything within my power to make your life a living Hell!”

Carmen and Fusia smirked in approval.

Shayla smiled back at her three adversaries.

“Don’t sell yourself short, Snella. You’ve made my life miserable since the first day we met.”

## Chapter Eighteen A Shot In The Park



Willow went home from school with mixed emotions that Friday afternoon. Though she was proud of Shayla in the way in which she handled her three antagonists, she still felt uneasy about her relationship with Razzel. She didn't mean the things she said to her when they argued, but the heat of the moment got the better of her patience.

When Willow walked through her front door, she was happy to see that her mother had worked a morning shift and was home early.

"Hey, Mom."

"Hi, Baby. I just put a chicken in the oven. It won't be ready for about two hours. I got a twelve-pounder – the way your brother eats. While it's roasting, I'm making a run to the supermarket. The grocery list is way too long for Kresh Fruits. Grand Grocers has some good

sales this week.”

“Need some company?” Willow asked as Mrs. Krimble put on her coat.

Mrs. Krimble looked at her daughter for a moment before responding with a question of her own.

“How are things with Razzel?”

Willow shrugged.

Mrs. Krimble sat on the sofa and invited her daughter to join her.

“You know, Willow, I may not be as good at these talks as your grandmother was, but I do know a thing or two about holding onto a friendship.”

“She’s just such a hot-head, Mom, and I—”

“Let me finish, Willow.”

Willow sat at full attention as she fought the urge to glower at her mother’s curtness.

“I love your Aunt Klisa, you know that. We were best friends growing up and although we didn’t have everything in common, we always loved spending time with one another; shopping, going to the movies, talking about boys... But there was a time, when we were teenagers, where we didn’t speak for two years.”

“What?”

“That’s right. And if you ask me what our fight was about, I couldn’t even give you the details. The problem was, neither of us wanted to make the first move in making amends. In our minds, whoever approached the other would appear to be admitting they were wrong. So, two stubborn teenagers, living under the same roof, ignored one another. We pretended to get along fine in front of Mom and Dad, but when they weren’t around, we wouldn’t even make eye-contact.”

“When did you start speaking again?”

“Now those details, I can give you. In her senior year of high school, Klisa fell for this guy, Franklin Smildridge. She was madly in love with him and, let me tell you, he was really cute. They dated for a year before he left to attend college out-of-state. Klisa was heart-broken. They wrote each other and spoke on the phone constantly. Just a few days before he was supposed to come home for the holidays, Klisa received a package in the mail. Franklin had sent her an expensive new coat that Klisa once admired in a store window. She was confused as to why he hadn’t delivered the gift himself, until she read the letter that accompanied it.”

“Uh, oh.”

Mrs. Krimble nodded, brows raised as she continued her recollection.

“Said he met someone else and it was too difficult for him to maintain a long-distance relationship ... begged her forgiveness.”

Willow shook her head, disheartened.

“I found her sobbing in her room on her new coat; spotted the wrapping paper on the floor and a crumpled letter on her bed. It didn’t take an investigative reporter to realize what had happened.”

“Did you say anything to her?”

“I didn’t need to. I placed my hand on her shoulder and when she turned around, she could see, by my expression, how terrible I felt for her. Fight or no fight, I hated to see my sister in that way. We hugged and cried for 10 minutes.”

Willow smiled.

“That night, we threw her new coat and Franklin’s letter into the fireplace and watched them burn. Neither of us muttered another word about Franklin Smildridge, or our silly little fight.”

“That’s great.”

“No, it’s not great, Willow.”

Willow was taken aback.

“We lost two years of friendship over some silly fight and I hate to think how much more time we would have lost if she’d never gotten that letter.”

Willow understood her mother’s preaching and knew she was right, but...

“She basically called me weak, Mom. If I call her now, she’ll just—”

“You do what you think is best, Willow,” Mrs. Krimble cut in, standing up from the sofa, grabbing her keys from the coffee table. “We’re out of ice cream. What was that flavor you loved so much?”

“Cinnamon Pretzel Dough.”

“That’s right. You and Razzel ate two cartons that weekend you were upset about something that happened at school.”

“Real subtle, Mom.”

Mrs. Krimble kissed her daughter on the forehead and made her exit without saying another word.

Willow asked Wyatt to keep an eye on the chicken, knowing he couldn’t eat it for a while. She decided to take a walk to Shashaw Park.

Upon her arrival, Willow wasn't surprised to find herself alone. Between the time of day, and the December chill in the air, the park was completely deserted.

Willow enjoyed the cool air. She preferred it to the heat of the summer, especially since she hated wearing shorts or skirts.

There was a grassy knoll just past the sandbox where Willow loved to sit under a large oak tree and think without TV's blaring, phones ringing or dogs barking. Willow especially loved it in the Fall and Winter when the park was usually empty.

She sat on the cool grass, pondering the events that had taken place during the last several months of her life. Her mind raced with visions of the people she had helped... The loss of her grandmother... Regaining Shayla's friendship ... losing Razzel's... It had been quite a ride. She felt a stream of emotions flow through her: wonder ... joy ... sadness, and even anger. She suddenly found herself thinking of Grandma Trisha's dialogue: *"Never lose her, Willow ... you need each other..."*

As Willow's meditation weaved in and out of her relationship with Razzel and her grandmother's final

words, she found herself contemplating something that had been bothering her ever since her grandmother's passing: How did Grandma Trisha know about her secret and what did she mean by, *"You'll be hearing from me soon..."*

While astray in her thoughts, Willow heard voices in the distance. She looked up and squinted to see a group of skaters entering the park, boarding towards her. As they approached, she could see there were four of them; three boys and one girl. Willow didn't recognize any of them. They looked as if they were old enough to be seniors in high school.

As they rode past her, one of the boys gave Willow a menacing stare. She watched them as they boarded away from her, passing the swings, the monkey bars; growing smaller and smaller until they vanished behind the brush of the tall trees.

Willow decided she'd better head back home before it got any darker. She reached the south gate when she heard rustling behind her. She whipped around frantically to spot two squirrels chasing one another up a tree. She smirked, shaking her head at her own paranoia.

Just as Willow was about to turn back around to exit,

she was startled by a hand on her shoulder. With all of the emotions still flowing through her, she lashed around and struck her would-be-assailant on the bridge of his nose with the bottom of her palm.

“Oh, God, I’m so sorry!” said Willow to the boy on the ground who was holding his bloody nose. “I didn’t realize it was you! Are you okay?”

“Oh, never better,” the young man replied with as much sarcasm as he could, tilting his head back to slow the gush of crimson oozing from his nostrils.

Willow instinctively reached for her hair-kerchief, but she was wearing a wool cap, which was completely useless at the moment. She was relieved to see the boy pull out a tissue from his pocket to stop the bleeding.

“I wasn’t sure you’d recognize me without my ponytail,” said the Kresh Fruits employee in a nasally tone, getting back to his feet, “but I never imagined I’d get *this* kind of reception.”

“I’m sorry,” Willow continued to apologize. “I didn’t even look at you. I was just startled and I—”

“Hell of a palm-strike you got there, Willow. Nice reflexes. Wouldn’t wanna face *you* in a steel cage.”

Willow let out a slight chuckle.

“That’s actually the only move I know. This girl—” Willow paused to re-think her response, “—my best friend ... she’s a martial arts fanatic and she insisted I learn to defend myself.”

Willow grasped the friendship bracelet around her right wrist. She wore it every day for six years; placing it around her wrist in the morning had become second nature to her.

“Your friend’s right. I shouldn’t have snuck up on you like that.”

The boy wiped his nose, and Willow was relieved to see the bleeding was already beginning to subside. She knew she couldn’t heal him and risk revealing herself to someone who was practically a stranger. She didn’t even know his name.

“I really am sorry.”

“Forget it. I deserved it ... ever since the day I snapped at you at my register. I just hated being there, you know? Forced to work for my uncle for less than minimum wage just because me and my mom are staying at his house?”

“So, I guess that day with the jars...” said Willow, “...I should have kept my mouth shut? Let Mr. Kresh fire you?”

“Nah, you did good. I hated working there until I thought I wouldn’t be allowed to anymore. Thing is, I really hated moving here from LA. It’s just too quiet.”

Willow looked slightly insulted. She loved the tranquil surroundings of Samoset. How dare this guy from the west coast insult her suburban New York town.

“I just tried to keep to myself,” the boy continued. “Tried to block out *Snoreville* under my headphones with some Metal.”

Willow was slowly beginning to grow agitated. That was twice this guy took a dig at the town she grew up in.

“But you know,” said the boy, wiping his nose once again,” the more I worked in my uncle’s store, the more I began liking it here. Some interesting characters here on the island.”

Willow smiled.

“I can’t argue that.”

“So ... I’m sorry I was such a jerk to you. I just resented being there at the time. I never had a job before,

but then again, I never had spending money either.” The boy pointed to the slender MP3 player attached to his belt, no doubt replacing the huge clunky CD player Willow had seen him sport during their previous encounter.

“Apology accepted,” said Willow, “if you can forgive me for going all *paranoid victim* on you.”

The boy dabbed his nostrils with the bloody tissue and gave a huge sniff.

“No harm done; I’ve had worse injuries than this.”

Willow smiled once again.

During their previous encounters, Willow hadn’t noticed the boy’s piercing green eyes. She couldn’t understand why, but they appeared to make the boy easier to engage. He also seemed less menacing with his hair down. It was a lot longer than Willow had expected.

“So, why haven’t I seen you at school?” Willow asked.

“Oh, do you go to Gripnest High?”

Willow was embarrassed; it never occurred to her that the boy was in high school.

“Oh, um ... no,” she replied, suddenly dropping her gaze to the floor. “I go to Ginkelman – Middle School

... eighth grade.”

“Oh, okay. I guess we’ll be schoolmates *next* year then. I’m only a freshman.”

Willow looked up again, relieved to find she wasn’t too far off in assuming the boy’s age.

After a moment of awkward silence...

“My name’s Trist, by the way,” said the boy, putting out his hand for Willow to shake it.

Willow’s nerves suddenly began to race once again. If she made contact, she would heal the boy’s trickling and, no doubt, throbbing nose. She needed to think of something quick.

“I’m just getting over a bad cold...” she said, faking a sniffle, “...still sneezing into my hands and all. Don’t wanna spread any germs.”

Trist retracted his hand.

“I wish you were concerned about germ-spreading when you were introducing your hand to my face,” he joked.

Willow couldn’t help but smile again.

“Trist, huh? That’s an interesting name.”

“It’s short for Tristan, but I hate it, so...”

“Well, it was nice to officially meet you, Tristan – uh, Trist.”

“It’s cool; it doesn’t bother me when *you* say it, for some reason.”

Willow blushed.

“So, I guess I’ll see you...” said Willow, suddenly feeling coy, “...at the market.” After she said it, she realized just how lame it sounded.

Trist smiled at her.

“Need an escort home?”

Willow’s palms were clammy and her heart was pounding in her ears. She was dying to accept Trist’s offer, but she knew her mom would freak out if she saw her 13-year-old daughter being accompanied by a strange boy from her older brother’s high school.

“No, I’ll be fine. I walk this way alone all the time,” she said, trying not to sound too disappointed.

“Cool, well, see ya ... at the market,” Trist said with a smirk. “Sorry if I scared you.”

Trist turned around and made his way toward the north gate. He stepped onto Brighton Street and made a left. If he looked back at all, he would have seen Willow’s eyes glued to him the entire time.

## Chapter Nineteen Razzel's Greatest Fear



Willow made up her mind to call Razzel as soon as she got home. She decided her mother was right; it didn't matter who made the first move. Time was being wasted and Grandma Trisha's death had helped Willow realize how truly precious time could be. She couldn't wait to tell Razzel about her adventure in self-defense. No sooner did she hang up her coat, when the phone rang.

"I'll get it!" Willow called out. She could hear her mother putting groceries away in the kitchen.

Willow recognized the number on the caller ID and smiled. She answered the phone on the third ring, eager to hear Razzel's voice.

"'Bout time, loser," Willow teased.

"Hello, Willow, it's Mrs. Fiora."

Willow paused for a moment before responding.

"Oh ... hi, Mrs. Fiora. Is everything okay?"

“Willow, I heard about what happened between you and Razzel and I feel terrible about it. I know she can be a stubborn hot-head – she gets that from her father. I was wondering if there was any way I could convince you to come by the house tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow?”

“If at all possible. I really feel like Razzel needs you right now.”

“Is she alright?” Willow asked, suddenly panic-stricken.

“Oh, she’s fine. I just hate to see the two of you mad at one another. Please, Willow, will you come?”

“Sure, Mrs. Fiora. I’ll be there. I just have to do some chores in the morning. I’ll stop by as soon as I’m done.”

“Oh, that sounds great, Willow. Thank you. Please give my best to your mom and Wyatt.”

“Will do. See you tomorrow.”

“Good bye, Willow.”

Willow hung up the phone and felt as if a huge boulder had been lifted from her shoulders. She would stop by Razzel’s tomorrow, tell her about the incident in the park and everything would be back to normal. She hoped when she briefed Razzel on how Shayla put

Snella and her cronies in their place, Razzel would at least attempt to see Shayla in a new light. But if not, she would give her some time.

The following morning, Willow leapt onto her chores, completing them in record time. She checked the bus schedule and ran to catch the 9:15. When she arrived at Razzel's house, it was as if the fight between them had never transpired; it felt routine to get together over the weekend. As she made her way up the Fiora's walkway, she could see that they had hung up their Christmas lights. A feeling of elation overcame Willow as she climbed the front steps and rang the doorbell.

"It's open," called Mrs. Fiora's voice.

As Willow opened the front door, she was surprised to find the living room cloaked in darkness, with all of the blinds drawn. A small antique lamp gave off the slightest bit of light on an end-table alongside the sofa. Willow could see the silhouette of Mrs. Fiora who pointed upward, without a sound, signaling Razzel was in her bedroom.

Willow quietly removed her coat and gloves and climbed the stairs to the second floor. When she reached

Razzel's room, she thought about barging in, as she and Razzel often did on one another, but given the circumstances, she decided to knock.

"Yeah?" a faint whisper called out from behind the door. Willow barely recognized the voice of her best friend.

"Raz, it's me. Can I come in?"

There was a pause of silence before Razzel's response.

"No," she muttered. "I can't talk right now."

"Raz, I know you're angry. I was upset too, but we need to talk about this."

After another brief pause...

"I can't talk right now ... I'll try to call you later."

Willow was growing frustrated. She rushed to get through her chores, skipped her Saturday reading session and ran to catch the bus, only to be turned away?

"Raz, this is stupid. I'm here *now*. Can't we just talk?"

There was no reply. Willow put her ear against the door and was surprised to hear what sounded like a faint whimper, but it couldn't be. Willow regretted the way she chose to handle her argument with Razzel, but she never expected it to affect Razzel this deeply. She decided to enter Razzel's bedroom. She opened the

door to find her best friend lying in bed, face down, sobbing into a pillow. Willow rushed over to her and sat beside her.

“Raz, are you alright?”

Razzel sat up, replacing the pillow on her face with her two hands.

Raz, what is it?

Razzel didn't respond, but continued to weep behind her mask.

“Raz, talk to me!” Willow insisted, prying Razzel's hands away from her face, revealing a stream of tears.

“I'm fine,” sobbed Razzel, wiping her tears with her right sleeve.

“Raz, I've never seen you like this. What happened?”

Razzel stared at Willow for a few moments before finally responding.

“It's ... my ... my mom.”

“What about her? I just saw her downstairs. She seemed fine.”

“She's just putting up a front for my benefit. She's ... she's...” Razzel broke down once again, masking her tears behind her hands.

Willow grabbed Razzel by her wrists and pried her

hands away from her face for a second time.

“Tell me, Raz!”

Razzel covered her face yet again. Willow was beginning to grow weary of this game.

“Razzel Fiora!” she said sternly, “are you going to tell me what’s going on or do I need to speak to your mother?”

Razzel unmasked her face and began wiping her tears with the only dry sleeve she had left.

“She’s sick, Will”

“How sick?”

“Can’t get any sicker. Cancer – stage four. Doctors said if they caught it sooner, they could have tried to treat it earlier, but they said it metastasi ... metasi –”

“Metastasized?” Willow cut in.

“That’s it,” sobbed Razzel. “Just their fancy way of saying how much it spread. My mom’s been sick for a while, but she finally decided to clue me in yesterday.”

Razzel broke down for a third time, prompting Willow to pull her hands away from her face, yet again.

“Raz, it’s gonna be okay ... I promise you.”

“I know you’ll be here for me, Will, but it’s never going to be okay – not without my mom.”

Willow and Razzel had been through a lot together over their decade of friendship. Razzel had her share of angry moments – too many to count – but Willow had never experienced her friend in this emotional state. Razzel knew she couldn't threaten the cancer; she couldn't beat it into submission; clever insults wouldn't make it go away... She felt completely powerless. The tears were coming faster now, easier.

Willow pulled Razzel toward her and embraced her as Razzel began to wail on Willow's shoulder.

"Shhhh. It's okay, Raz," she said in a whisper. "I won't let this happen."

Razzel pulled away from Willow, now drying her tears with the back of her hands. She looked at her best friend and forced a smile.

"You're crazy, you know that? There's a lot you can do, Will. I envy you more than you can imagine, but this ... this is just something you *can't* fix – no one can."

Willow grabbed Razzel by her wrist and yanked her off her bed, pulling her toward the bedroom door.

"Let's go," she said firmly.

Razzel was dumbfounded as she grabbed her glasses from her nightstand, tripping over her own dirty laundry dispersed on her bedroom floor.

“Where we going?”

“We need to see your mom!”

“Will, I really don’t think she wants to see anyone. She’s really tired and—”

“This’ll only take a minute.”

Willow bounded down the stairs with Razzel at her heels. Willow reached for the light switch at the bottom of the staircase and flipped it up to find Mrs. Fiora lying on the sofa, her eyes closed in a peaceful sleep. She seemed thinner than the last time Willow had seen her, and her beautiful cinnamon skin appeared to have lost its radiance.

“See...” said Razzel, “...she needs to rest.”

“She has the rest of her life to rest,” replied Willow very matter-of-factly.

Razzel gave Willow a disconcerted stare.

“Mrs. Fiora!” Willow called out.

Mrs. Fiora woke with a start.

“Oh ... Willow, hello again,” she said, straightening up. “Everything okay between my two favorite girls?”

Willow sat down beside Mrs. Fiora, as Razzel looked on, confounded by her friend's actions.

"Your hand may be enough," said Willow, ignoring Mrs. Fiora's question, "but just in case, where exactly is this cancer?"

Mrs. Fiora looked a bit stunned. She gave Razzel a puzzled expression as Razzel shrugged, sharing in her mother's bewilderment.

"Well, Willow ... it's gastric cancer. It started in my stomach and —"

Before Mrs. Fiora could continue, she was startled by Willow rolling up her shirt just enough to reveal Mrs. Fiora's belly button. Willow placed both her hands on Mrs. Fiora's stomach, forcing her to flinch.

"Sorry," said Willow, "my hands are always cold. Just try to relax."

Out of sheer shock and confusion, Mrs. Fiora and Razzel did not move a muscle.

"Come on..." said Willow, her eyes focused on her target, "...go away ... she's way too young for this ... not her ... she needs to stay."

Willow looked into Mrs. Fiora's eyes and could see that there had been no change in her frail appearance.

Willow closed her eyes and concentrated. She found herself thinking about her father – how withered and worn he looked during his final days. Her eyes remained shut as she began her chant once again.

“Come on, she’s a mom! She’s someone’s mom! I can’t – I **WON’T LET THIS HAPPEN AGAIN! SHE NEEDS TO STAY!**”

Willow opened her eyes and knew there was still no change. Mrs. Fiora looked as confused and as fragile as ever, while Razzel continued to look on in disbelief.

Willow closed her eyes once more, her hands now trembling as images of her past flooded through her. She witnessed a seven-year-old girl dressed in black, clinging to her mother’s side as a coffin was being lowered into the cold, wet ground. Rain drops intermingled with tears on the little girl’s face as she tossed a book of children’s poetry into the muddy pit that would soon be sealed off forever.

Razzel and Mrs. Fiora could see tears beginning to seep through Willow’s closed lids as she began her final plea...

**“HER DAUGHTER NEEDS HER, DAMN IT! YOU GET THE HELL OUT OF HER! I WON’T LET YOU**

**DO THIS TO THEM - YOU HEAR ME? YOU'RE NOT STRONGER THAN ME! YOU'RE NOT STRONGER! YOU GET THE HELL OUT OF HER - NOW!"**

Willow awoke to find herself lying on Razzel's couch, while Mrs. Fiora was dabbing a cold, damp cloth on her face. She had no sense of how much time had elapsed since she had placed her hands on Mrs. Fiora's stomach.

"Will!" Razzel shouted. "You're awake!"

"What happened?" said Willow, beginning to sit up.

Mrs. Fiora and Razzel glared at one another, but Mrs. Fiora was the first to speak.

"You tell us. One moment, I'm sitting here, sick and exhausted ... the next moment, I feel healthy and full of energy, while you're lying lifeless on the floor."

"I fainted?" asked Willow, now sitting, clasping her forehead.

"More than that," said Razzel. "Your eyes rolled to the back of your head and you let out this crazy scream. Then, you just went limp. Freaked me out, big-time!"

Willow felt nauseous. Why hadn't this happened to her before? She had an unnerving suspicion.

“Raz,” she said, “what’s that gash on the back of your hand?”

“What? Oh, I didn’t even realize. I must have scraped it against the coffee table trying to lift you up. You rolled off the couch and—”

Razzel was interrupted by Willow grabbing her wrist, yanking her towards the sofa, forcing Razzel to sit beside her. Willow placed her fingers on Razzel’s scrape, the room fell silent and then...

“It’s gone,” Willow whispered.

Razzel stared at the long scrape on the back of her hand. The scarlet streak was more apparent, now that it was beginning to throb.

“Will? You okay?”

“It’s gone,” Willow repeated, “I can’t do it anymore.” She quickly looked up at Mrs. Fiora. “Are you sure you’re—”

“Positive, Willow,” Mrs. Fiora beamed. “I don’t need to be a doctor to know that my strength has returned.”

“Then that was ... that was the last time,” said Willow.

Kneeling alongside Willow, Mrs. Fiora grabbed her right hand.

“Willow, I don’t know how you...” Mrs. Fiora ran her hand over Willow’s cheek. “There are just no words to express my gratitude. You’ve been an angel to my daughter for all these years, and now...”

Willow could see tears forming in Mrs. Fiora’s hazel eyes as they gazed into Willow’s without blinking. It was a relief to see tears that were not rooted in sadness for a change.

Razzel scooted over to get closer to Willow and threw her arms around her. She rested her head on Willow’s shoulder and tightened her embrace.

“Thanks for always taking care of me, Will.”

## Chapter Twenty

### *A Gift From Grandma Trisha*



Willow was exhausted when Mrs. Fiora drove her home, late afternoon. Healing Mrs. Fiora not only consumed Willow of her ability, it seemed to drain her physical energy as well.

She was thrilled to have her best friend back in her life and was extremely relieved that Mrs. Fiora was going to be fine, but she was still a bit staggered that her gift was gone. She was too tired to think about it all at the moment as she spotted her comfortable sofa.

As Willow collapsed between the cushions, she noticed a group of cardboard boxes on the coffee table, accompanied by others scattered across the living room floor. She could hear someone coming down the stairs. She turned to find her mother walking toward her with a look of deep frustration.

“Sorry about all of these boxes,” said Mrs. Krimble. “I

told your brother to take them to the attic two hours ago. He's moving at his usual lightening speed."

"What's in 'em?" asked Willow, too tired to acknowledge her mother's sarcasm.

"This is the last of your grandmother's belongings that your Aunt Klisa and I decided to hold onto. Since her house just sold, I needed to finish clearing it out." Mrs. Krimble suddenly gave her daughter a blissful smile. "I actually have something for you."

"Really?"

"It appears when your grandmother found out she was sick, she set something aside for you. In my frenzy to pack everything, I didn't notice the strip of tape on this box, but when the boxes were delivered today, I began sorting through them, and it's a good thing I did."

Mrs. Krimble leaned down behind the sofa and lifted a dusty, old box. She handed it to Willow who spotted a thick piece of white tape running across one side. Written in black marker, was one word: **WILLOW**

Willow anxiously opened the lid to the box and pulled out something heavy. As she gently unraveled the tissue paper around it, the gift began to reveal itself.

A ceramic ballet slipper was the first portion exposed. Willow smiled and tore the wrapping more aggressively. When she was done, she held up her gift with a huge smile. The graceful ballerina she had admired for years would now sit on a shelf in her room, a reminder of the loving mentor who had left it to her.

“She knew how much you loved it,” said Mrs. Krimble.

### **CRASH!**

Both Willow and Mrs. Krimble were startled by the loud noise that boomed from the floor above them.

Mrs. Krimble huffed.

“You know, I don’t ask him to do much around here! I hope it wasn’t the crystal vase that once belonged to my great grandmother!”

Mrs. Krimble left to investigate which heirloom Wyatt had just destroyed in his careless attempt to cart boxes up to the attic.

Willow shook her head and smiled as she continued to examine her new treasure. She removed a box from the coffee table to place her statue on it, but when she set the ballerina down, she was surprised to see how unstable it was. She hoisted it back up and examined

the bottom of the base. Just when Willow thought the day could not get any more exciting, she spotted the cause of the statue's instability: There was a small envelope taped to the bottom of the base. Willow immediately peeled it off. With her heart racing at warp speed, she took a deep breath and broke the envelope's seal.

*Calm down, she thought to herself, pulling out three folded sheets of paper. It might not even be for you. Maybe it's been here for years.*

She quickly unfolded the papers. Her heart leapt as she recognized Grandma Trisha's handwriting at once:

*My Dearest Willow,*

*First and foremost, let me say that you are and always will be my favorite grandchild. Is it wrong for a grandmother to choose her favorite? Perhaps, but that is of no concern to me now. Next, I want to thank you for always being there for me when others were either too busy or too distant. You never forgot about me and I love you for that.*

*For this is all an old fool like myself can ask for during her golden years – to be remembered by those I care about most.*

*Oh, Willow, where to begin. Ah, yes, of course – your gift. No, I'm not referring to the statue I just gave you, but your ability to heal others. Surprised that your old Grams knows your secret? You must have a million questions and I'm sorry to say, I do not possess all of the answers you seek, but perhaps I can shed a little bit of light.*

*When I was about your age, I ran into a gang of teenage boys who were torturing this poor stray cat. They thought tying glass bottles to its tail and legs would be funny. What a mess. The poor thing had cuts all over her body, as the group of hooligans just stood there, laughing uncontrollably. I told those boys off, as only I could, but I doubt it did any good.*

*They simply mocked me as they rode away on their bicycles, leaving the poor cat to bleed to death. I gently untied all of the bottles from her limbs and carried her home. The entire time I held her, I hoped for her recovery, attempting to comfort her with words of encouragement that she could never understand, but as she gazed up at me, I could swear that she could. As soon as I got home, I placed her in a basket in the kitchen. By the time I wet some cloth towels to clean up her wounds, she was up and about without a scratch. Her fur was blood-stained, but her cuts were completely healed. Well, that was the start of it.*

*You're the only person I have ever shared this story with, Willow. Not even your grandfather knew about this. Of course, by the time I had met him, I had lost the gift. It would have come in handy the night he got himself pummeled by the*

*entire high school football team.*

Willow paused; she needed to go back and reread part of the letter: *Of course by the time I had met him, I had lost the gift.* The possibility of her unique ability leaving her *had* occurred to Willow, but she never put too much effort in worrying about it. Even now, she realized it never would have made a difference if she knew Mrs. Fiora would be her final patient; she would not have changed a thing. She read on:

*I remember the moment I realized what I could do and, for the first time in my life, I was terrified. I was barely a teenager and for such a responsibility to be placed on someone so young... I saw it as more of a burden than a gift, really. I did what I could, being extra-cautious not to reveal my secret. I didn't go looking for opportunities to use my ability. If one crossed my path, only then would I choose to share my gift. This is a decision that I have regretted for the remainder of*

*my years. Like most things in life, you do not truly realize what you have until you lose it. A bit cliché, but so very true.*

Willow felt a surge of warmth flow through her as she read the hand-written words before her. It was as if she could hear Grandma Trisha's voice; as if she were truly there speaking to her.

*I wanted to tell you all of this the moment I figured out you possessed this ability. How did I figure it out? Simple, really. One Fall morning, while you were off at school, I decided to surprise your mother with bagels on one of her rare mornings off. The surprise was on me when no one answered the doorbell after my cab had already pulled away. As it turned out, your mother had taken on an extra shift and left me standing there with a bag full of bagels and a pound of strawberry cream cheese. Fortunately, that darling neighbor of yours, Carlo,*

was outside walking his dog and took note of my predicament. He invited me in for some espresso and we had a nice breakfast together. We got to talking about the grandkids and who should come up but a certain freckled teenager. He seemed quite apprehensive to tell me what had happened to him. Not because he had any clue that you had saved his life. He actually thinks it was some strange miracle. I guess, in a way, he was right. Anyway, he was hesitant to tell me about his collapse because he didn't want me to tell your mother. Samantha Krimble, RN, would be all over him to get checked out at the hospital if she only knew.

I had no doubt what you had done and I felt like this would be my opportunity to share my regrets with you; on how I wish I could have helped more people. I struggled with myself and decided against

telling you. I know you, Willow – all too well. I knew that you wouldn't need any guidance from me on helping others. It's what you do, with or without some special ability. I felt if you wanted to share your secret with anyone, it should be your decision.

Please do not be angry with me for keeping you in the dark about my illness. I knew If I told you I was sick, you would feel it was your responsibility to save me and I did not need to be saved.

As Willow continued reading, she was forced to relive the final moments by her grandmother's bedside as Grandma Trisha explained, in writing, how *her time on this earth was up*, how *she needed to reunite with the love she had lost*, and how *she did not want to be a burden to anyone*... Willow found it difficult to read, but she did not cry. She had already grieved so much over these same words during Grandma Trisha's final moments in the hospital, and in the days that followed. She also knew

her grandmother would not want her falling apart over this letter. She swallowed the lump in her throat and pressed on. She was nearing the bottom of the letter now, fretfully aware of its foreseeable closing.

*As for your gift, knowing the way my granddaughter is, I must advise that, although I should not have taken it for granted, you should not feel it is up to you to save the entire world. You can only do what you can, Willow.*

*As for the power itself, I wish I could tell you of its origins or how long it lasts. I tried speaking with my mother and grandmother about any interesting family traits that I should be aware of, but all I could get out of them was an old story about a great aunt who was part of a traveling stage show. Some telekinetic fraud who created illusions of spoon bending and levitating objects across a stage by summoning them with her mind. Not exactly the answers I was searching*

for. I decided not to tell my family about my ability. They were quite religious and I did not want them to think I was claiming to be some devout healer.

There is one thing I can tell you. Not sure if you have figured this out on your own, but it is not enough to just touch someone in order to heal them. You must want them to get better; you must yearn for their wellbeing. If I know you, this will not be an obstacle.

Willow had reached the final paragraph. She read slower, wanting to savor every moment of her reunion.

I would just like to ask one final favor of you, my Willow. I want you to look out for yourself as much as you do for the others around you. I have never met someone so preoccupied with the happiness of others that her own joys in life fall to the wayside. Dream how you wish to live, and live out your dreams. Oh, listen

*to me, getting philosophical. I guess this means it's time for me to go now. Remember that I will always be with you and if you should ever need someone to speak to, I will always be listening.*

*Love, always and forever, with all my heart,*

*Grandma Trisha*

Willow held the letter close to her heart for a moment. As much as she tried to fight it, a tear escaped her eye, but this time it was out of bliss rather than mourning. She reread the letter a few more times before placing it back into its envelope. She tucked the envelope safely into her side pocket just in time to hear her mother climbing back down the stairs.

“Thank goodness ... your brother only broke an old tea pot from one of Mom and Dad’s trips to England. I told him if I hear so much as a thud, the next thing to break will be one of his limbs.

Willow laughed. Suddenly her brother’s carelessness was much funnier than it was when the initial sounds

of shattering ceramic were heard only a few minutes earlier.

“Willow, I hate to ask; I know you just got home, but can you do me a favor?”

“Sure, Mom.”

“I’m out of eggs and I promised I’d bake cupcakes for Wyatt’s team fund raiser tomorrow and since he already ate ten from the batch I made yesterday...”

“No problem, Mom.” Willow suddenly began to feel her energy coming back. The rush and excitement from the letter had made her forget all about how drained she felt when she first arrived home.

“Thanks, Baby. I’d go myself, but I need to sort through a few more things here and if I send your brother to the store, these boxes will be here until next week.”

“Oh, don’t sweat it,” said Willow. “I wanted to go to Kresh Fruits anyway. There’s someone there I’d like to talk to....”

## Chapter Twenty-one A Very Special Day

Two Years Later...



“Relax, Will,” said Razzel, “it’s only pizza. If the conversation gets awkward, you can always shove some garlic knots in your mouth.”

“I’ve already got knots in my stomach,” replied Willow, pacing in her bedroom.

“I haven’t seen you this nervous since your first ballet recital last month, and you were amazing.”

Willow smiled.

“What’s the big deal anyway?” said Razzel. “You guys talk all the time at school, and on the web. It’s just another chat session.”

“I know, Raz. You’re right. But try tellin’ that to my stomach.”

Razzel grabbed Willow by the wrist and forced her to sit on the bed beside her.

“Listen, Will, any guy would be incredibly lucky to go out with you. You’re smart, cute and funny. If your date doesn’t realize that, then he’s not even worth your time. Just focus on having fun tonight. It’s just like hanging out with a friend. And if it doesn’t go well ... you could practice that new choke-hold I taught you.”

Willow could not help but laugh.

The door to Willow’s room swung open, as a large figure entered. He was just over six-feet-tall and wore a tight t-shirt, accentuating his firm, muscular build.

“Hey, Squirt,” said Wyatt, “have a good time tonight – but not too good.”

“So it never sinks in, does it?” said Razzel.

“What?” replied Wyatt.

“The countless times we asked you to knock before barging in here, never seeps in through that thick skull of yours. What if we weren’t decent?”

“Come on, Raz,” replied Wyatt, “your attitude’s never decent?” He laughed a bit too hard at his own joke while Razzel and Willow did not even crack a smile.

“Ahem, well anyway,” Wyatt pressed on, “Mom told me to remind you to be home by 10:30 tonight. She’s

really disappointed she couldn't be here for your first date, but her promotion at the hospital's got her busier than ever."

"I spoke to her earlier," said Willow. "Thank God she isn't here. She'd just make me more nervous."

Wyatt was about to leave Willow's room when she called him back.

"Oh, Wyatt, I almost forgot; Krieb Miller called while you were in the shower. Said his cold's turned into the flu and he can't make the movie tonight. He sounded awful."

"What!" Wyatt was outraged. "McFarkus! We've been planning this for weeks!"

"It's only a movie," said Willow. "Can't you just go when he's—"

"Only a movie?" replied Wyatt, aghast. "The live action version of *Warrior Skull*! 'Only a movie?'"

"*Warrior Skull*?" said Razzel, confused. "That doesn't open for another two weeks."

Wyatt reached into his back pocket and produced two tickets.

"Not for those of us who are going to the advanced screening," he said, complacently.

Razzel immediately sprang up from Willow's bed.

"Shut—up! No way!" Razzel snatched the tickets from Wyatt's grasp to examine them more closely.

"Just one of the many perks of being captain of the Gripnest Gravediggers," Wyatt boasted in a tone that was far from modest. He watched Razzel as she studied the small print on the tickets. She felt Wyatt's stare and handed the tickets back to him, somewhat embarrassed by her overzealous behavior.

"Well ... have fun. Let me know if it's any good."

"Hmmm," Wyatt appeared to deliberate upon his dilemma, staring intently at Razzel. "I was gonna make a few calls, but maybe *you'd* like to tag?"

"Me?" Razzel was flustered. "Isn't there some cheerleading senior you'd rather take?"

"You kiddin'? Sit there next to some fake-nail-wearing drama-queen who keeps checking her watch every 15 minutes because she'd rather be sitting through *The Sisterhood of Dandelions* or some other chick-flick? Nuh, uh. I need someone who can appreciate the art that is..." Wyatt stared off into the distance as if entranced "...*Warrior Skull!*" He turned his gaze back to Razzel. "You in?"

Razzel looked at Willow for guidance. Willow responded by cocking her head to one side, raising her brows and smirking.

Razzel turned back to Wyatt and folded her arms before giving her response.

“You know ... I have to have nachos while I’m watching a comic-book-adaptation. Just a rule I have.”

“So what’s the problem?” replied Wyatt. “I always get two orders anyway. I can spare a few chips. We leave in an hour.”

As Wyatt left Willow’s room, Razzel made her way back to the bed and sat down beside her best friend, avoiding all eye contact.

“Hmm,” muttered Willow, “I was wondering when something like that would happen.”

“Huh?” said Razzel, nonchalantly. “Something like what?”

“Oh, come off it, Raz. At each other’s throats for years about which superhero’s the coolest; which slasher film is the goriest; both of you making me sit through 70’s kung fu marathon’s...”

Razzel acted as aloof as she could.

“I don’t know what you’re getting at.”

“...and, on top of everything,” continued Willow, “Wyatt’s adorable and *you* know it.”

“I wouldn’t say adorable, Will.”

“He’s got my dad’s dimples. I always love it when Wyatt smiles. But, I digress. I think you and Wyatt are a great idea.”

“What idea? My best friend’s brother happens to have an extra ticket to a flick and since it’s short notice...”

Razzel was interrupted by the sound of the doorbell. She was never so relieved to hear it.

“Aha!” she said. “It’s about freakin’ time! I’ll get it.”

Hoping to avoid any further discussion about her impromptu screening, Razzel darted down the stairs so quickly, she stumbled down the last two steps. She quickly opened the front door. The figure before her carried two stuffed shopping bags draped over each arm, while holding a stack of clothing so high, it was obstructing her face. This did not prevent Razzel from recognizing her.

“You’ve got some nerve, Shayla Stergus, you know that?”

“What? I’m only 40 minutes late. I couldn’t decide what to bring.”

“So you brought everything in your closet?” said Razzel, grabbing a pile of clothes from Shayla, lightening her load.

“Razzel, don’t be absurd. There isn’t a truck large enough to cart over my entire wardrobe. No, these are just a few things I grabbed, which I feel would highlight Willow’s hair color, contrast her eyes, accentuate her —”

“Just get up there,” said Razzel, returning the clothes atop of Shayla’s pile in order to stifle her. “She’s a nervous wreck and her date’s gonna be here any minute.”

Razzel watched in amusement as Shayla struggled and fumbled to transport her cargo up the stairs. She considered lending Shayla a hand, but the doorbell rang once again.

Razzel opened the front door to find Tristan Kresh smiling at her, holding a bouquet of daisies. He was wearing a brown leather jacket, a blue button-down shirt, black leather work boots and black jeans. His red, slicked-back hair glistened as it pulled into a tight ponytail, the end of which reached the middle of his back.

“Not surprised to see *you* here,” he said to Razzel, stepping over the threshold.

Razzel gave him a distrustful stare. She had gotten to know Trist at school, and aside from finding him a bit smug, she felt he was harmless. That is, until he asked out Willow on a date last week. The role of overly protective best friend would not easily be relinquished, even in high school.

“So,” said Razzel, “pizza, huh?”

“Yeah, I know how much Willow likes it. Bella Mozzarella just expanded into a full restaurant. Thought we’d check it out and then take a walk through the park. Willow loves the park.”

“Seems like you’ve gotten to know a lot about our young Willow.”

Trist smiled.

“She’s not *that* young, Raz.”

“The name’s Razzel ... Tristan.”

Sensing the tension emanating from Razzel, Trist instantly altered his expression.

“I just meant I’ve been wanting to ask her out for two years, but her mom wouldn’t let her date anyone until now and —”

"I think she should wait at least another year," Razzel cut in, "but hey, I'm not her mother."

"No, you're not!" Trist snapped back.

The two teens stared one another down for a moment, neither of them conceding to blink until finally Wyatt's entrance from the kitchen seemed to extinguish a bit of the tension.

"There's the lucky man who gets to take out my baby sis," said Wyatt, oblivious to the friction in the air.

"Hey," said Trist, finally breaking eye contact with his opposition, "there's the man who single handedly scored 32 points in last week's game against Pramton High."

"Flattery will get you everywhere," said Wyatt as he plunked down onto the sofa, grabbing the remote.

"So, Tristan," Razzel called out, demanding the young man's attention once more, "I wanted to be clear that Willow isn't just an acquaintance ... she's my family. Do we understand each other?"

"Not really," replied Trist, his tone indifferent.

Razzel took a step closer to him.

“I want her to have fun tonight,” said Razzel, her gaze lethal. “She deserves it. But if I find out that you hurt her in any way, emotionally or otherwise—”

Trist rolled his eyes and side-stepped Razzel, interrupting her would-be threat. He took a seat on the sofa next to Wyatt, tossed the bouquet of flowers onto the coffee table and rested his size 11 boots upon the ottoman before him. He stared at the basketball game on TV as if Razzel did not exist.

Realizing what had just transpired, Wyatt looked at Razzel to find her wearing her signature seething expression. He picked up the candy dish from the coffee table and began popping M&M’s into his mouth, his full attention now on Razzel and Trist; nothing on TV could top this.

Wyatt looked on with profound interest as Razzel kicked the ottoman out from under Trist’s legs, grabbed him by his jacket collar and hoisted him up to his feet.

“Listen to me, Rapunzel!” Razzel spat, “you break her heart and I will *rip* yours out and show it to you while it’s still beating!” She raised her brows as she yanked him closer, practically touching noses. “Is that clear enough for you?”

Trist looked at Wyatt for support, but all he received was a broad grin and a nod as Wyatt proceeded to pop more candy into his mouth. Trist turned back to face Razzel, who's grip apparently would not relinquish until she received her answer. After several tense moments... "Yeah ... yeah, it's clear."

Razzel shoved Trist back onto the sofa with such force, the sofa legs on his side scraped the hardwood floor as they skidded back an inch.

"Good," she said, forcing a smile. "Now, I'll go see if she's ready for you."

Trist adjusted his posture, but did not dare get back to his feet. He stared straight ahead, feigning interest in the basketball game. He could see from his peripheral vision that Wyatt was still staring at him. It made him very uneasy.

After a few awkward moments, Wyatt finally broke the silence.

"You know ... when she crinkles her nose just before she's about to strike, it's kinda cute isn't it?"

Trist didn't say a word, but continued to stare straight ahead, praying for his date to make her way down the stairs.

Razzel reached Willow's room to find clothes scattered all over the floor and bed. Willow was wearing a blue & black striped v-neck shirt with a long matching hair-scarf and navy wide-leg dress trousers.

Shayla spun her around for Razzel to get a better look.

"Well?" said Shayla.

"I've gotta hand it to you, Shay," said Razzel, "you do have a great eye for fashion. Will, you look amazing. Casual, yet classy."

"Thanks. What kept you?"

"Oh, I was just having a little chat with our guest," replied Razzel, suddenly interested in checking her fingernails.

Shayla let out a chuckle.

"Raz?" said Willow, suspiciously, "You didn't! Please tell me you didn't threaten him!"

"He's a 16-year-old guy, Willow," Shayla chimed in. "Trust me, he needs to be threatened."

Razzel nodded to Shayla for the backup. She then spotted a long teal skirt on the edge of Willow's bed that matched the shirt she was wearing. She picked it up and rested it against her waist.

"Hey, Shay, can I borrow this tonight?"

"Sure, but where are *you* going? I thought we could mall-it while texting Willow every five minutes."

"Think again," said Willow. "I'm not the only one who has a date tonight."

"It's – not – a – date!" Razzel shot back. "I'm going to a movie with a friend – that's it."

"Really?" said Shayla, suspiciously. "Which friend?"

"My brother," Willow responded before Razzel could.

"Well, it's about damn time," said Shayla. "If I have to sit through one more King Kong versus Godzilla debate..."

"Oh, I'm certain we haven't heard the last of that one," said Willow, "except now, they can argue about it over one milkshake with two straws."

Razzel stood in her spot, staring at her two chortling friends, with an expression of speechless defeat.

"Well, enough stalling, Willow," said Shayla. "Let's finish your makeup. Razzel, put down that skirt. It clashes with the hazel in your eyes. We can do much better. Just let me finish up with Willow and then we'll turn the warrior into a princess."

“Let’s not make a production about this movie, guys,” Razzel pleaded, but Shayla ignored her as she beckoned Willow to sit in the chair facing the dresser mirror.

“Turn to me for a sec,” Shayla instructed Willow, finishing up her blush. “I just want to touch up those cheeks.”

While nervously clutching an old wire hanger, Willow spun around on her swivel chair so swiftly, she accidentally scraped the tip of the hook against Shayla’s forearm.

Shayla let out a slight yelp as she retracted her arm in pain.

“Oh, Shayla!” Willow jumped up, tossing the hanger aside. “I didn’t even realize—”

“Don’t sweat it, Willow,” Shayla replied. “I’ll live.”

The gash was deep, and blood droplets were spilling onto Shayla’s dress.

Razzel tossed the blouse she was examining and ran over to her friends. “Careful, Shay,” she said, straightening her friend’s arm, “you’re getting blood on yourself.”

“Oh, please, ” said Shayla, apparently unaffected by her injury, “I’ve got plenty of other dresses.”

“Raz,” said Willow, “grab that box of tissues on my nightstand.”

“Right.” Razzel streaked across the room but there were no tissues to be found. “I don’t see them, Will.”

“I just opened a box,” said Willow. “Where did I put them?”

Shayla’s forearm was almost completely covered in blood.

“Oh, here they are,” said Razzel, spotting the open box of tissues on the rug, alongside Willow’s bed.

Razzel and Willow cleaned up Shayla’s arm as best as they could.

“That was a metal hanger, Shayla,” said Willow. “We’d better get some peroxide on your arm so it doesn’t get infected.”

“Spoken like a true nurse’s daughter,” said Shayla. “Stop making such a deal about this. Just give me something to wrap around my arm to stop the bleeding and we can call it a day.”

“Hang on. My mom brought the peroxide in my room last week to get a stain out of my carpet. I know

she left it in here." Willow searched frantically on her dresser through the sea of makeup and accessories she laid out to get ready for her date. "Gotta be here somewhere."

"Hurry up, Will!" said Razzel, applying pressure to Shayla's arm with the final tissue in the box. "We need to wrap this arm up."

"Where is that damn peroxide?" shrieked a frustrated Willow, knocking over blushes and lipsticks on her dresser.

Finally, giving up the hunt, Willow pulled a hair kerchief from her dresser and began wrapping Shayla's arm.

"Good as new," said Shayla. "And look, the color matches the floral pattern on my dress. You're learning, Willow."

"Shayla, I'm sorry. I was holding that stupid hanger and I wasn't paying attention."

"Forget it," said Shayla. "Let's touch up those cheeks and get you on your way."

"You guys finish up," said Razzel, "I'm gonna clean up this rug."

Willow looked down at the cream colored carpeting beneath her. The droplets of Shayla's blood stippled into it were more than apparent.

"Oops," said Shayla, "Sorry about that."

"What are you apologizing for?" said Willow. "This is all my fault."

"All right, enough with the blame-game already," said Razzel, checking her watch. "We gotta get movin'."

"Don't worry, Razzel," said Shayla, smirking, "we'll get you ready for the ball."

"Just a movie!" said Razzel defensively. "Besides, I was thinking about Will. Slick-Red is downstairs waiting for her."

Willow was examining the blood-stained rug when Shayla grabbed her by her shoulders, spun her toward her and began touching up her cheekbones as if nothing had happened.

"There," said Shayla. "Perfect."

Both Willow and Shayla's attention was suddenly drawn to the scene of Razzel wiping the blood off the rug with an old t-shirt she found on Willow's bedroom floor. She seemed to be making the stain worse by smearing the crimson dots into the carpeting.

"This isn't working," admitted Razzel. "I'd better wet this with some water."

"How about bleach," suggested Shayla.

"That would totally ruin the rug," said Razzel.

"I hate to sound like a broken record," Willow chimed, "but if you dilute some hydrogen peroxide—"

"We know, Professor Chemistry," said Razzel, "but since you can't find it..."

"This is so frustrating," said Willow. "My mom just used it. It couldn't have just disappeared!"

Razzel and Shayla rushed to the bathroom, just outside Willow's bedroom, to see if they could find anything to get the blood stain out before it set.

Willow glanced at the clock on her nightstand and realized how late it was getting. She huffed in exasperation while extending her right arm in front of her dresser, as if presenting the clutter of cosmetics and accessories to someone.

**"WHERE IS IT!"**

Willow's exasperation immediately turned to shock at what she witnessed next: A silk scarf, which Shayla tossed on Willow's dresser earlier, began moving as if possessed; something was sliding underneath it.

Willow's eyes widened as she saw a brown plastic bottle reveal itself from beneath its silk veil. It soared through the air and landed in Willow's open palm.

Willow instinctively clasped it. She turned the bottle around apprehensively, revealing the logo of the local pharmacy. Directly beneath the logo read the words:

*Hydrogen Peroxide*

Razzel and Shayla returned with a damp sponge and a bottle of shampoo.

"This is all we could find," said Razzel, suddenly realizing Willow was frozen in her spot, gazing at the brown container within her grasp.

"Will? You okay?"

Willow appeared transfixed by what she was holding.

"Willow?" called Shayla, concerned by her friend's meditative state.

"WILL!" Razzel shouted, finally breaking Willow out of her apparent enchantment.

"Huh?" Willow finally replied. "Oh ... hey, guys."

"Will, what's wrong?"

Willow stared at Razzel and Shayla for a moment before stealing another glance at the beckoned object within her clutch.

She turned her attention back to her friends with a nervous grin, presenting the brown plastic container to them.

“Found it...”

**End**