

JANUARY LIGHT

Beneath the white blanket, Mother's stomach rose and fell in her sleep. Afternoon shadows danced along her cheek, and the soft smell of her rose-scented face cream soothed my restless thoughts. Outside the window, the cruel January snowstorm that had kept us locked in the house and away from school for days had finally ended. If I sat up at just the right angle, I could see how the ice dangled from every tree limb and bush, leaving a hard, crunchy layer that I imagined would be painful when we went sledding tomorrow.

Mother's soft snores soothed me back to her side. She had told me to take my nap, and I wanted to rest, but no matter how hard I tried, it was impossible. Her growing belly lay between us like the base of a snowman, leaving me with little space between her and the couch cushion.

I couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to have another baby in the house. There were already three girls, and with me in the middle, I had to fight for every ounce of her attention. I pushed back the blanket to see the outline of the unborn baby's hand pressing to the surface from inside her belly.

Watching closely, the hand appeared and then vanished a moment later, just like a tiny starfish coming to the surface. I placed my fingers in the spot where I had seen it and waited. A moment later, it appeared again and gently pressed into my palm.

Mother stirred in her sleep, her eyes gently fluttering open as she yawned and stretched, pulling her arm up along with mine. A silver string connected our wrists. Mother said it was to make sure I didn't wander off like I did last year. Father was furious when he found me in the backyard playing with the neighbor's dog. She slowly untied the string from our wrists and tucked it back into the drawer beside the couch.

"How long was I asleep?" she asked, rubbing her eyes.

I shrugged. Time hadn't been something I was good at yet, even though my third-grade teacher, Mrs. Harvey, continued to try to teach me.

"The shadows moved from there," I pointed to the wall, "to there," I pointed to the other wall.

Mother smiled and stood, holding her belly.

"It must be time for dinner," she said. "Go get your sisters and tell them to set the table."

I hurried from the room just as my older sister, Helen, emerged from our bedroom carrying our younger sister, Cassie.

"Mother said to get ready for dinner," I said. Then, I rushed past them to the kitchen and quickly flung open the cabinets, pulling out breadcrumbs and eggs.

Mother had promised to make pork chops for dinner with mozzarella. When Father was home, dinner had to be on time, healthy, and quiet. We weren't allowed to laugh at the table. She could never make something so fattening if Father were home, but he was gone for another week on business, so we could eat whatever we wanted. I'd be her helper while Cassie made handprints in the flour and Helen argued that the family should consider going vegetarian.

The oil popped in the pan. Mother pulled back her hair and tucked flyaway wisps beneath her red kerchief. Her thin frame appeared strained with the weight of the baby. With her left hand pressed to her back, she lowered another pork chop into the pan.

"When can we go outside?" Cassie asked as she patted her hands again into the flour.

I squatted to the ground and pulled her into my lap. "Four-year-olds can't go out in the cold at night," I said. "You'll get frostbite in this weather."

"The snow will bite me?" she asked.

Helen smirked while Mother wafted away the rising smoke.

“No, silly,” I said. “It’s just too cold. We have to stay inside.”

Those words made Mother frown. I knew she hated being stuck indoors. Her gaze shifted to the window and the setting Michigan sun. It had already been so dark for weeks. Each day seemed to bring less light.

“Maybe we can go to the store tomorrow,” Mother said, an uplifted tone in her voice.

“Really?” Helen asked. “Isn’t that dangerous? I mean the roads will still be covered in ice.”

“Sometimes we have to take risks,” Mother said.

Helen knitted her brow and said, “Father will be furious.”

Mother ignored her comment and went on preparing the marinara sauce.

I swallowed and hugged Cassie. It hadn’t been the first time Mother took us out in dangerous conditions, but she was right. An adventure was what was needed to lift our spirits, and we had to live each day to the fullest.

After dinner, we followed the nightly routine of washing and drying our long hair and braiding it so that in the morning we’d have what Mother called mermaid hair. Cassie had two small, braided pigtails. Helen’s blond hair was nearly to her waist now. At twelve years old, she was the envy of every girl in school. She took her time, threading strands with her slender fingers into one long braid that draped over her shoulder.

“You have to comb it correctly,” she said to me as I ripped through my shoulder-length matted mess.

She took the comb and helped me untangle the knots and then plaited what I hadn’t destroyed into two even braids.

Mother's voice called to us from down the hallway, and we hurried to her room. She sat in bed with a book in her lap. I couldn't wait to see which one she had chosen for us tonight. Beside the bed was the secret box containing dozens of her vintage books.

There were three that were my favorites. The first was the one with a big dog on the front cover, whose name was Buck. The second was Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. The third was the story of Dorothy and her ruby red slippers that clicked three times, wishing her to go home. I always loved that she had the power all along to go home, and I loved Mother's soft and steady voice when she read it to us.

Sometimes, I felt like those stories were the only things in the world that belonged just to us, not to Father, not to school, not even to the baby inside her. Just us and the words, curled together under the covers.

Before she read, she would gather us into bed. Helen would sit with her knees folded behind her on Mother's left side. Cassie would tuck herself beneath Mother's right wing, and I would perch at the end of the bed, crisscross applesauce, near her feet, listening intently and imagining myself as one of the characters.

Mother's first words as she cracked open the books were always the same. "These books were passed down to me from my mother. We must take care of them. And you can never tell your father about them."

The stern warning always came with Mother's furrowed brow that made her softness vanish. I bit my lip and nodded as she made each of us promise to keep her secret. We knew Father wouldn't mind us reading, but he'd be furious if he knew that Mother had been hiding anything from him.

We had discovered Mother's secret earlier in the week when Helen opened the newspaper and saw an advertisement listing several of her books alongside our phone number. Helen gasped and covered her mouth. "Do you think Father saw this?" she whispered to me. I remember the way the air got tight in the room when she said that.

Not long after, a young man with jet black hair and round glasses arrived on our doorstep. Mother appeared with the book *Treasure Island*. After the exchange, I felt as if someone had robbed us of one of our memories, had taken a moment that was meant just for us, and run away with it. But the way Mother's face shone and her eyes danced at the cash in her hand told me that the trade had given her a moment of freedom that was bigger than the story.

After reading several chapters of the new book, *The Secret Garden*, she put it back in the box with the others and told us it was time for bed.

"Oh, no," I said, begging her for one more chapter.

"You should have something to look forward to tomorrow," she said, and I knew she was right.

We shuffled off to bed, Cassie already half-asleep. I dreamt of tomorrow and a bright sun in the sky and sledding down the biggest hill in the world.

In the morning, the doorbell rang. Mother's distant voice from the hallway stirred me from my sleepiness. I threw back the covers and hurried down the hallway just in time to see her handing over a book to a woman at the door.

My gaze narrowed to the title just before the exchange of money. *The Secret Garden* had slipped from Mother's hands. I froze, feeling my chest tighten.

Once the woman had left, Mother shut the door. She counted the money. “Fifty dollars,” she said, slapping it against her thigh. She turned to see me and said, “Tell everyone to get dressed. We’re going shopping.”

My gaze shifted to the floor, wondering how she could be so hurtful. We hadn’t found out the most important parts of the story yet, and now the book was gone.

“Grab all the bottles,” Mother said as she headed with Cassie to the car.

Helen and I went to the garage and collected the heavy bag of glass bottles and cans we had found over the last few weeks in nearby parks and trash cans. We heaved it into the back of Mother’s AMC Eagle while she revved the engine and told us to hurry.

A few moments later, we were on our adventure. My thoughts about Mother selling our book faded and were replaced by the excitement of being out of the house.

The roads were covered in a mixture of black slush and salt. Only a few cars were out today. Our car skidded a few times, but Mother knew what she was doing and always pulled us back onto the road. The naked trees dangled their arms while bushes coated in icicles looked crunchy and good enough to eat. The scent of gasoline mingled with the thin burning scent of frigid January.

Once at the store, we hauled the plastic bag from the car. It clanked and clattered across the salt-lined pavement as we dragged it into the massive store that sold not only clothing and house goods, but just about everything else you could imagine. It even had a restaurant that served the best grilled cheese sandwiches.

As soon as we were inside, Mother grabbed a cart and told us we had one hour and not to lose Cassie. She turned the cart away from us and disappeared down one of the aisles.

The recyclables ended up getting us four dollars and twenty-five cents, enough for one grilled cheese sandwich and maybe a Coke at the restaurant. Cassie sat in the booth waiting for us while Helen ordered the meal that came with chips and pickles.

“Would you like to spin the wheel for a chance to win?” the waitress asked. She had soft grey eyes, hair wrapped in a bun on top of her head, and a scratchy voice.

Helen and I knew what was at stake. We had spun that wheel so many times, always in the hope of winning the grand prize – a hot fudge sundae with all the fixings. We had never won, not once in the three years since they started it.

“Sure,” Helen said. She reached up and grabbed the corner of the wheel and gave it a huge pull. It ticked around at lightning speed.

My eyes followed the word *sundae* until it blurred, and I had to look away.

Cassie stood up in the booth and yelled, “Go, go, go!”

I glanced back just as the wheel inched its way toward “Try Again” and “Free Bag of Nuts”.

Then, suddenly, something felt different. My pulse quickened. My eyes widened. I grabbed onto Helen’s hand. The ticker slowed to a stop with one final click, landing on the words *Hot Fudge Sundae*.

I screamed. Helen hugged me. Cassie jumped up and down.

The waitress handed us three spoons. A passing customer congratulated us. I couldn’t help but cry and remember Mother’s words about always having something to look forward to. This was it. This was the something.

Minutes later, sitting at the counter, the waitress handed us a grilled cheese sandwich, a Coke, and the biggest hot fudge sundae we’d ever seen. The scoops were piled so high that the

sprinkles and nuts toppled off the whipped cream and scattered at its base. The gooey fudge dripped in streams, cutting its way to the bottom where I scooped it up like soup.

We dug into chocolate and vanilla, and for a few minutes, we didn't exist in a superstore on the outskirts of Detroit but on a cloud somewhere in heaven. Whipped cream lined our upper lips. Cassie chewed on the cherries. I dug into the fudge. Helen closed her eyes and sighed.

We licked the last of the dessert from our spoons, cheeks pink from laughter.

Cassie wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and said, "Can we find Mother now?"

"Let's call her on the intercom," I said, grinning.

Helen leaned in. "What should we say?"

I thought for a second. "How about, Mrs. Hobbs, your three honeydews are waiting for you by the checkout."

Cassie giggled. "Honeydews!"

Helen tapped her chin. "Or: Mrs. Hobbs, your children have all turned into frogs. Please come to the front immediately."

"Or Dolphins," Cassie said. "And we swam away—"

"Up the river into Lake Huron," I added.

For a second, it felt like magic again—the kind we used to make when stories could fix anything. Cassie laughed, and even the tired clatter of dishes behind the counter faded into the background.

Helen smiled and said, "And only you, Mrs. Hobbs, can call them back... by reading the next chapter of *The Secret Garden*."

But then, the silence between us returned. I looked down. My spoon rested in an empty dish. I didn't want to tell them that there wouldn't be any more of that story. We wouldn't find

out if Mary ever found the way into the secret garden, or who was making the mysterious crying sounds in the manor halls.

“Let’s just go find her,” I said quietly.

We found Mother lost in her thoughts in the book aisle. She sat on the ground beside her cart, reading a newly published book.

“Mother?” Helen said.

She glanced at her watch and gasped. “Oh, I lost track of time.”

I helped her to her feet. In her cart, she had more books, clothes for the baby, and a few beauty items that Father would never have approved of her buying.

The ride home was quiet. I couldn’t help thinking about how Mother looked on the floor of the store, lost in her thoughts while reading her book. I wondered if she would need me to help her when the baby came or if I was just a burden to her.

As we came around the corner, I saw our home ahead and Father’s town car parked in the driveway. I felt my chest tighten. Helen sat up in her seat. Cassie’s sleepy eyes widened.

“Momma?” Cassie said, a tone of worry in her voice.

Mother slowed the car to a stop. Father was supposed to be gone all week.

She then turned to us and said, “When we get in the house, no mention about the shopping today. Go straight to your room and get ready for dinner.”

“Can we help?” I asked.

Mother shook her head. We knew the drill.

Inside, the house was cooler than when we had left. The lights had been dimmed. A lingering scent of tobacco smoke drifted from room to room. The dishes from the night before

were still piled in the sink. The newspaper where Helen had shown me Mother's book sales was open on the counter.

We hurried to our rooms and changed out of our clothes and waited for what felt like an eternity.

My stomach grumbled from the ice cream. Cassie cried that she thought she was going to throw up. Helen calmed her by giving her sips of water from the bathroom sink.

It was then Father's voice echoed from down the hall.

I sat up in my bed and hurried to the door.

"Leave it alone," Helen said, stopping me. "Don't get involved."

"But he knows about her selling the books. He must have seen the newspaper ad." I pulled from her grip and ran to the bathroom to find my mirror. I followed the sound of Father's angry voice to their bedroom and crouched on the carpeted floor.

From behind the closed door, there was the sound of paper tearing. I twisted the knob but it was locked. My chest tightened. With shaky hands, I slid the mirror beneath the door and gazed into their bedroom to see Mother in the corner.

Father leaned over her. Mother's open box of books lay scattered on the floor. Several had already been torn apart. Pages were scattered across the floor, and Mother crouched from her spot, trying desperately to save what remained.

He ripped another book in two. His strong hands tore straight through Dorothy's face. My shoulders slumped as I leaned back against the wall, listening as he destroyed the remaining books. Mother cried, and I felt the silver string between us straining. Massaging my wrist, I glanced back into the mirror to see her cowering as he threw the spines of what had been our memories back at her.

I wanted to go lie in her arms and comfort her, to promise her that there would be other stories. That we could tell them together. That there were many stories out there that would help us escape long, cold winters, confinement, and Father's cruelty, but as I gazed into my mirror, I saw on her face her furrowed brow and too big belly holding her small frame to the ground. Tears streamed down her red cheeks, and I knew that there was no other story for her in this moment. This was the only one. This was the truest one. This was the one that she could not escape.

Powerless, I waited until Father's anger subsided. Mother's cries lessened. I took my mirror and went back to the room.

Cassie rocked in her bed, her thumb in her mouth.

Helen shook her head at me. "Why do you get involved in their business?"

"Don't you care what he just did?" I shot back.

"Father knows what's best for the family."

"He ripped up all the books."

Helen looked away as I kicked the bed frame and clenched my fists.

That night, I fought sleep. I stared at the ceiling until my eyelids grew heavy. It felt like only a moment passed before Helen's voice woke me in the early morning hours.

"Mother's going to have the baby," she whispered. "Father and I will take her to the hospital."

"Me, too?" I asked.

"No, Mother wants you to stay. Take care of Cassie."

Before I could object, she slipped from the room.

Outside, the sound of Father's car engine roared to life. Moments later, all was quiet. My heart ached.

Once the sun had risen, I made my way down the hall to Mother's room. Books were scattered around the floor. Pages were torn from their spines. Half of *Robinson Crusoe* lay in one corner. The other half lost. *Anne of Green Gables* lay inverted like the spine of a fish without its body.

Cassie and I stayed cuddling in her bed. It was too cold to go out. When, finally, the phone rang, we threw back the covers and rushed to answer it. With both our ears pressed to the receiver, we heard the news.

Helen's voice was such a comfort in that moment of isolation. "Mother had her baby," she said. "A little boy."

"Boy?" Cassie said, smiling.

"A boy," I said. "A little brother."

Helen laughed and said, "Father's thrilled."

I fidgeted with the phone cord. "Really?"

"So happy. I've never seen him like this."

I swallowed. "And Mother?"

"She's fine. Father wants to bring her home tonight. The doctors said no, but he said he knows what's best for her."

"And the baby? He will come home, too?" I asked.

"Of course, silly. He's strong and healthy. This will change everything," Helen said.

"Father always wanted a boy. He will be happy now. You'll see."

When I finally hung up the phone, Cassie's big blue eyes turned up to me as if wondering what it all meant.

Helen's words fell on deaf ears. I didn't believe that Father would ever change. Not the way he spoke to Mother or destroyed her dreams. Not the way he made us live in fear. Not the way we hoped for him to leave for longer trips. No, if anything, the only thing that would change is that Cassie and I would be forgotten if we weren't already.

A few hours later, they arrived home. Father came into the house smoking a cigar. Helen helped Mother through the door. She passed by us, not saying a word, and disappeared into her bedroom with the baby.

"Let her rest," Helen told us. "She's had a rough time."

We listened all afternoon as Father hummed to himself while Helen flitted about, making sure Father's dinner was prepared on time. Cassie disappeared back into her bed. Without notice, I slipped from the room and headed to see Mother.

Climbing into her bed, I saw her swollen face. Her belly was deflated. Beside her lay my little brother. His face was small and red. His eyes were dark and full of mystery.

"What is it?" Mother asked, reaching out to touch my cheek.

I couldn't stand it another minute. "Please, Mother," I sobbed. "Please don't forget about me."

She held my head up and, with one hand, grabbed my chin and with the other wiped the tears from my eyes. "You have nothing to worry about," she said, smoothing back my hair. "I will always love you. I will never forget you. Not even for one minute."

"But your books. Our books. They're gone."

"We'll get more."

“Where?” I demanded, feeling fresh tears sting the corners of my eyes.

“You’ll find them. We’ll find them.”

I lay my head on Mother’s chest. The baby held my finger. I couldn’t believe it. A little brother. He lay beside me, gazing into my soul. I couldn’t help but think that maybe Mother was right. Perhaps I would find the stories again. We would finish them together or apart, but they would be there. This was not an ending but a new beginning.