

1

The sun hung low in the sky, sinking toward the horizon. A slight breeze stirred the trees and blew through the empty swings. Their chains jostled and clinked. The jungle gym was deserted, as were the monkey bars, the seesaw, the slides. The park was empty.

Almost.

There was one child still at the park. One child who had been left behind.

Her name was Holly Thorn. She was playing hide-and-seek.

She was crouched inside a short tunnel. It was a good hiding spot. She would have been hard to find, and even harder to catch.

That is, if anyone had bothered to look.

Holly curled her legs, her feet propped up on the blue plastic wall of the tunnel. She frowned, crossing her arms, trying to stop her bottom lip from quivering.

She should have known better. No one *ever* wanted to play with her. But then today, out of the blue, the other kids asked if she wanted to play hide-and-seek. Owen Orlofsky, wiping his nose with his hand. Karen Graham, always blinking super slowly because everyone said what long eyelashes she had. Zoe Zamarripa, the tallest in their class, standing with her hands on her hips like some sort of drill sergeant. They were all smiling and giggling and giving one another knowing looks.

Looking back, it was so obvious. None of those kids had ever liked her.

But Hector was with them. Hector, her younger brother, by a year.

Did he know what they had planned?

Now everyone was gone. They had all left her in the park, alone. It had been a trick. They'd never wanted to play with her. They just wanted to have a laugh at the nerdy girl without any friends.

It hadn't always been like this. She used to have friends. She thought she did, at least. The memories weren't clear, more of a feeling—other kids around her, at recess, at birthday parties. And she and Hector had been inseparable. But that was a long time ago now.

Holly heard the wind pick up again, whistling past the tunnel, and wiped her tear-streaked cheeks. She crawled out of the tunnel and saw something odd.

The trees weren't moving with the wind. Neither were the leaves on the ground. Even the blades of grass stood still.

A hazy mist crept in, blanketing the park in fog.

A figure emerged from the mist. It was a man, his face hidden by a wild tangle of stringy brown hair. His clothes were dusty and patched up and like something a peasant would have worn hundreds of years ago. He was walking slowly, straight toward Holly, looking right at her.

Holly froze in place.

The man approached. He spoke, his voice rough and coarse. "Holly Thorn," he said.

How does he know my name? Holly thought, too shocked and frightened to respond.

"You hid," the man continued. "But you were not found. You thought you were playing a harmless game." He stepped closer, his voice low and ominous. "You were *wrong*."

She didn't know what that meant. She just knew that something strange was happening—something strange and terrible—and nothing would ever be the same.

2

Holly did what any sensible person would do if a strange, hairy man dressed in raggedy old clothes appeared in a park and began talking nonsense.

She ran.

Her house was only just across the street from the park. She sprinted as fast as she could, yelling, "Help!" as she ran. She looked over her shoulder to see if the man was following her, but the street was empty. There were no people, not even cars. Even the birds were silent.

She lived in a redbrick house on the corner. Holly sprinted up the driveway and to the rusty metal gate that was part of the breezeway between her house and the garage. She swung the gate open and ran through the yard to the back door.

She went inside, slammed the door, and locked it.

She should have felt safe. But she didn't.

What had that man been talking about? Where had he come from? *How did he know my name?* She wiped sweat off her forehead and realized her hands were trembling.

"DAAAAAD!" she screamed. Her voice cracked with panic.

Her dad would be home. He hardly ever left the house these days. *Ever since Mom . . .* Holly shook her head. She couldn't start thinking about that right now.

She ran through the house to her dad's office. The door was closed, which meant she wasn't supposed to bother him. She twisted the doorknob and slammed her shoulder against the door anyway, busting into the room.

Her dad was at his desk, where he always was, hunched over his computer. He was tall and thin, and over the last month or two, he had gotten even thinner. His arms, once tanned and freckled by the sun, were now pale. He sat engulfed by stacks of files and papers. They cluttered his desk, piled high against the walls, and even surrounded his chair. It was as if he had literally walled himself in with his work.

He didn't look up when Holly crashed into the room.

"Dad!" Holly said from the doorway, her heart still pounding. "Dad, something happened! There was a man! DAD!"

He didn't respond. His eyes stayed locked on his computer while he typed with a single index finger, hunting and pecking each keystroke.

Holly knew he had been getting lost in his work, but this was ridiculous. Couldn't he tell how upset she was? She strode into the room, not caring that she knocked over a file or two on her way to his desk.

"Dad, *listen*," she pleaded. "Please, come on, this is serious."

She tugged at his arm. It wouldn't budge. It was like tugging at a statue.

"DAD!" Holly screamed, right in his ear. He didn't react. He stayed slouched over his computer, continuing to work as if Holly weren't there. Holly put her hands on his cheeks, like she used to do when she was little. She felt stubble prickling her fingers. He hadn't shaved. "Please, Dad, stop ignoring me, please!"

"He can't hear you," a voice said from behind.

Holly turned. It was the man from the park. He was here.

He was in her house.

The man loomed in the doorway. He was more than six feet tall and glowered down at Holly with brown eyes so spotted and stormy they had the color of fossilized amber. His face was tan and weathered, and he had a wild, bushy mustache so large it obscured his mouth. Dirt was everywhere—smudged and streaked on his nose, on his clothes, and under his fingernails.

Holly screamed. She grabbed her dad again. "*That's him!*" she yelled, and pulled at her dad with all her might.

"I told you," the man said, stepping forward, making a little *tsk* sound with his tongue. "He can't hear you. Can't see you. Can't even feel you."

He put a hand in front of her dad's face and waved it up and down, back and forth. Her dad just kept sitting there.

"See?" he said.

"DAD!" Holly screamed again.

The man raised his eyebrows, making his eyes wide. "He doesn't even *remember* you."

Holly searched her dad's face for any sign, any hint that he might be aware of what was happening around him. There was none.

"What's happening?" Holly asked, backing away, trying to get some distance from this man who had invaded her house. "Who are you?"

"My name is Oliver." He knelt on one knee, putting himself at Holly's level. "And you've got two choices. Stay here and be forever invisible. Forever forgotten. Or come with me."

Oliver waited for her to respond. His eyes were sad and intense, and he smelled earthy and funky.

Holly wanted nothing more than to run out of the room and as far away from him as humanly possible. There was so much she didn't understand right now. She didn't understand how this man had gotten inside her house or what he was doing there. She didn't understand why her dad couldn't see her. Why couldn't he feel her yanking his arm? Why couldn't he hear her screams?

But through all that confusion and panic, there was one thing she did know. It was the simplest of lessons, one that had been drilled into her head a thousand times over—never, *ever* go anywhere with a stranger. And this man was nothing if not a stranger.

"No," Holly said. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

"You'd rather stay here?" Oliver asked.

"Yes," she answered. "Yes, I want to stay here."

Oliver stood up. "Oh, no you don't," he said, shaking his head. "You don't want to stay *here*. Here is where everyone you know will walk right by you. Never noticing your tears. Never hearing your cries for help. Here is where you will be stuck, helpless, watching everyone go about their lives as if you never even existed. No, you do not want to stay here. You want to go *back*."

"Back?" Holly asked. "Back where?"

"Back to the way it was *before*," he said. He lowered his voice, seeming sad. "I understand. You want to be with your family. But there's only one way to do that." Oliver leaned down and held his hand out, inviting Holly to take it.

She stared at his outstretched hand, his palm lined with dirt and grime. Nothing that was happening made any sense. Nothing this man had said made any sense. Holly put her hands behind her back. She turned her head, looking away.

She wasn't going anywhere.