

Prologue

Morris the gardener stares at the digital clock. It reads 3:06 AM in soft green letters. Lying in bed next to his wife, he rolls onto his back and stares at the ceiling. The overhead fan is a grey star-shaped blur in the dark.

Quietly, he sits up, and shifts his legs so that they hang over the edge of the bed. Arthritis pains twist up his left knee. Careful not to wake Glenda, he stands with a low grunt of pain, dresses himself in a thick-knit sweater and a pair of khaki slacks, and makes his slow, creaking way down the stairs to the kitchen.

He has two and a half hours before anyone else in the house will be awake. He shares the house with his daughter, son-in-law, and granddaughter, but the house is completely silent. Morris is sixty-eight years old, young to be a grandfather but still an old man, old from years of tilling earth and smoking cigarettes. His wife Glenda is six years older than he is. He pushes his thick glasses up his nose and methodically makes himself a thermos of strong, black coffee, checking that the lid is screwed on tight. Its heat melts into his hands as he grips the thermos, and he has a strong urge to crack his knuckles, even though he knows he shouldn't. He cracks them anyway, because he might as well. His knuckles sound like twigs snapping in the silence.

Morris's face is made for smiling, but he is not wearing one now. He runs his hands through his salt-and-pepper hair. He pauses in the dark kitchen for a moment, and then walks into the family room. There are family photographs arranged in frames on the mantle. He stares up at them for a few moments. Biting his lip, he reaches up to one of the frames in the back of the collection—a photo of his daughter and granddaughter on the pier. His granddaughter is in the

middle of a blink. His daughter's face, unprepared for the snapshot, is slack and expressionless. It is not a picture anyone would greatly miss. He smiles, but the smile is watery and weak, and disappears quickly. He unclasps the frame and slides the photo free, slipping it into his back pocket before replacing the empty frame.

Morris stands silent for a few moments more.

Then he crosses to the closet in the hall, opens it with a gentle creak. A duffel bag, already packed, waits on top of his battered loafers. Morris slings the duffel bag over his shoulders, slips on his shoes, and heads outside in the darkness of early morning.

The streetlights have not yet turned off, and there is a thin fog clinging to the roads and dewy grass. There is not even a hint of greyness in the horizon. It is bitingly cold, but Morris has already passed over the threshold, so he does not go back inside to find his overcoat. He crosses to the old, cream-colored truck that sits parked in the driveway, lifts his bag into the passenger seat.

The headlights glow an ancient amber yellow.

Sitting in the driver's seat, he stares at the front door with its wind chime swaying gently. His sigh is shaky and wet. He looks down at the steering wheel, and mutters, "Good luck. With what's coming, I mean. I—I just can't do that again."

The morning is silent as Morris drives off down the road.

PART I

One Month Later

The garden was overgrown now. Looking up at the circling purple clouds, Ren could tell that the summer was fading, and it smelled of rain. The high sandstone wall that circled the garden was choked with hard green ivy, and the trimmed shrubs had lost their fine edges. Ren found her grandfather's favorite spot on a bench by the juniper bush, brushed away a twig. She sat for a long while and studied the countless ways the landscape around her had changed.

The pond was empty, but then again it always had been. The estate at the end of Fox Run had been vacant for almost forty years now, stuck in a strange custody between the bank and the town hall. Ren had never seen fish in the decorative pond. During the summer when she'd been eight years old, it was the sudden home of a handful of frogs, but never fish. Fish needed owners to take care of them, and no one in Hollowcliff, New York could ever quite decide to whom the house belonged, not since its last owner had passed away on a Monday morning in 1973. Ren drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, sneakers scuffing on the concrete bench. She couldn't help but stare at a milkweed pod a few feet away, as though accusing it of creeping in, of marking the absence.

Her grandfather worked for the town council keeping gardens maintained, and he'd long since refused to retire from his job. As an estate of some historical importance, the garden behind the house at the end of Fox Run fell under his territory as well. It had been an integral part of Grandpa Morris's weekly routine, waking up on a Saturday morning in the early dark with his thermos of black coffee, brewed too strong for Ren's taste. Sometimes she had ridden shotgun in his old cream-colored truck, gardening tools rattling away in the back as he made the hairpin turn down Fox Lane. There was something Morris loved about keeping a garden almost no one would ever see. Her mother had said that it helped him think. Ren had gotten a different answer. "Some things," he'd told her, "shouldn't be forgotten. You have to look after them, make sure they stay

put.” The corners of his mouth had wrinkled in that flat, eager smile of his, and he’d ruffled her hair. She didn’t want to think of that, now—she didn’t think he was coming back.

Ren’s legs were starting to go stiff with sitting and thinking. She bit her lip contemplatively and stared up at the tall shape of the house ahead. A pale yellow with black trim, there was something Victorian about the way it seemed to stretch absurdly tall and narrow, and its corners were sharp. She slipped her hands into the pockets of her jacket, reassured. Ren shifted to stand.

Her feet scuffed against the tall, browning grass as she made her way to the fish pond. Weeds had crept into the stones surrounding it, and the heat of summer had evaporated all but a small, dirty puddle amongst the dead lily pads. Ren stared down into it and saw her own stony grey eyes peer back at her. She lifted a hand to brush her messy bangs away—she had cut them herself a few weeks ago, and they were growing back in at all angles. A gust of wind brought with it the first few specks of rain. Ren stared up at the second-story windows. A deep frown flitted across her face for a moment, and she kicked one of the nearby stones into the pond, dislodging a clump of wild clover. “Stupid. The whole place is a mess.”

She didn’t want to know why he’d left. She didn’t think it would make any difference. It had been nearly a month now, and her grandfather had made it clear he wasn’t coming back. Her eyebrows furrowed, and the frown returned, angrier this time. Ren turned, and made her way to the back door of the house, falling under its shadow as she passed the hedge archway that led onto the brick patio. As she climbed the short set of steps leading up to the door, she looked over her shoulder, scanning the garden quickly. Ren tore off her jacket and wrapped it around her fist.

The sound of shattering glass was not nearly as loud as she'd thought it would be—as it fell to the floor inside, it was almost musical. She carefully drew her hand away from the jagged hole in the glass, breaking off more pieces until there was a space big enough to reach through. Her face worked in concentration as she fumbled for the doorknob, biting her lip so hard it hurt. “Come on,” she swore under her breath. “Come *on*.” Finally she felt it twist, and the door popped backwards in its frame with a loud groan.

The door swept aside most of the shattered glass as she opened it, and left it open behind her. Still, she felt the heel of her shoe grind a few stray slivers of glass into the floorboards, making a greenish-grey dust. Her eyes were wide as she stepped into the room, circling slowly as she surveyed her surroundings. The space was surprisingly bright and open, a large wood-paneled room that stretched from the front of the house to the back and housed two sets of staircases that curved upwards out of sight. There was a faded stripe where a carpet runner must have once been placed, but it was gone now. Set high in the ceiling at the front of the room were huge glass skylights with intricate lead tracery. Vast squares of grey sunlight spread across the floorboards.

Inside the house there was no furniture to speak of—the only object that remained within sight was a marble statue off to one side by the front double doors. It was a white lion perched on a square pedestal, cobwebs clinging to its stone mane. Ren thought that the carved lion's face looked stupid—there was something artificially happy about its expression. *It would have been better if they hadn't made it smile*, she thought with a halfhearted grin. As she stood there, she stared out through the windows at the front lawn. She could see the overgrown carriage-lane, and the double rows of trees, and beyond that, the street. Uncomfortably, she realized how visible she was to anyone who might be walking by. For a moment, she was consumed by the thought that

she shouldn't be here, that she was breaking the rules, and she would get caught. Again, she shoved her hands into her pockets for confidence. "Shut up," she told herself, and her expression hardened.

Ren took the stairs to the second floor carefully, afraid that they might have rotted out over the years. The carved bannisters were smooth under her fingers, and the steps were silent. However old it was, the bones of the house were still sturdy. There was a fraying oriental carpet on the landing at the top of the stairs, faded from the sun. The windows looked out over the garden, and Ren felt a queer sense of déjà vu, having stared up at these same windows countless times over the years. The drapes were gauze-thin. She stepped forward and pressed a palm to the rippled glass, staring out.

The fish pond was no bigger than a tarnished coin from here. The garden spread out behind the house in a semicircle, merging into the ancient, tangled apple orchard at the back. Over at the left was the wrought-iron gate, and the path that led back out to the street from the side yard. Weeds had grown up inside the flower beds that circled the lawn, but here and there the bright prick of a pink rose or orange snapdragon could be seen amongst the brown and green. The intricate maze of shrubs had gone fuzzy and blurred, too long since their last trim. Ren reached into her pocket, and took a step backward, drawing her grandfather's cigarette lighter out into the open.

It was heavy in her hand, tarnished from years of use. She could feel her pulse quicken, and swallowed hard. Moving quickly now, she reached out and tore down one of the drapes, the dust-colored fabric almost coming apart in her hands. It fluttered to the ground, and Ren kicked at it nervously, forming it into a soft, folded ball. There was less material there than she'd

wanted—the other drape would have to come down, too. Nerves clustered in her stomach, and she paused for a moment, breathing hard, a sickening ball of doubt sitting heavily inside her. *Don't be lame, you're almost there.* As she glanced upwards, her eyes caught something moving down in the garden below.

Ren froze—not out of fear, not exactly—though that was a part of it.

There was a man standing in the garden.