



THE LONELY BELOW



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CHAPTER 1

TWO DAYS EARLIER

Grown folks had a real bad habit of talking *about* me instead of *to* me. Miss Pixie had already done it six times in the five minutes we'd been on this campus tour so far. I found myself invisible a lot, especially because sometimes I just couldn't talk around strangers. But Miss Pixie, with her giant perfect teeth and bouncy cheerleader ponytail, forgot I was around just as soon as she recognized my dad as an old classmate of hers from way back when they attended my new school together. I lagged behind them, even though the tour was supposed to be for me.

If I didn't like having to come to Blythe Academy before, I completely hated it now.

"You're very lucky, Les; a lot of parents would kill to get their kid into Blythe." Miss Pixie punctuated that statement with a shrill laugh and a quick touch to Daddy's arm.

She didn't notice, but I did—he leaned away just slightly with a little fake chuckle of his own. He was uncomfortable. I thought about how Dr. Choudhury would have been proud of me for putting that together. But then that made me think about how I wouldn't get to see my therapist in person for a while and how sad that made me. I slowed down even more, scuffing my sneakers on the gravel walkway.

Blythe Academy's campus sprawled beyond what I could see. The perfectly green grass and redbrick buildings reminded me of a college, even though they started accepting students as young as prekindergarten.

Most kids felt scared or nervous or sad starting a new school. I'd done it so often that it normally didn't bug me at all. But here, I felt claustrophobic. Like the giant magnolia trees all around had uprooted and crept slowly, slowly over to surround me. Their massive white blossoms stretched toward me like hands. My breath quickened. I lost sight of Daddy and Miss Pixie before I knew it. And the trees kept slinking closer.

A panic attack. I had learned years ago how to recognize when they were starting, and how to shorten them, but that didn't make them any less scary. I couldn't call out to Daddy—my throat refused to open up enough for words to come out. Waves of fear threatened to overtake me, to drown me, to make

me feel like I was dying. Dr. Choudhury would have told me to keep breathing, find a way to ground myself, come back into the moment. So I stopped walking and sat down in the middle of the path and tried to press my palms firmly against the gravel to feel something solid.

Some students grumbled, annoyed, but their frustration didn't bother me the way it usually would during a meltdown. Instead of feeling embarrassed or weird, I just felt lost. Why hadn't Daddy turned and noticed I wasn't walking with them? Why was this stupid campus so big? And why were there so many dang trees?

I hadn't even moved into my new dorm yet and already my future at Blythe felt doomed. Normal kids at normal schools didn't have panic attacks or meltdowns. They didn't plop down in walkways and get dirty looks and refuse to speak or move or look at anyone. I *needed* to be normal. I needed to calm down.

But feeling so scared and nervous and stressed quickly turned into me forgetting if I'd ever felt calm before in my life. It felt impossible to remember what had helped calm me before. Music maybe? But none of my favorite songs came to mind. I couldn't distract myself with thoughts of adorable baby animals or a trip to an art supply store or memories of my sister letting me hang out with her in her room. I raised a hand to start rubbing my thumb against the cool metal of my necklace's locket.

MawMaw Septine had gifted it to me when I turned ten—a

thin-chained golden locket with a shiny oval opal embedded in the front of it. I felt proud that she trusted me with it. Inside was one coily ringlet from a Victorian-era ancestor. I'd forgotten over the years just how many greats into the past she was, and I felt too embarrassed to ask anyone. MawMaw Septine had gotten it from her grandmother, so at least two. She'd told me that there was nothing like feeling a connection to family to make you feel loved, or to keep you safe. Someday I hoped to pass it down to my own granddaughter. If I survived this panic attack. Which, at the moment, didn't seem possible.

My throat felt tight, the way it always did when I thought about MawMaw Septine. Nothing had been the same since she died two months ago. Nothing.

I didn't have a reason to cry, but my eyes didn't get that memo. Tears stung almost as much as the sharpness in my chest. This was it. I'd only just gotten to this new school, and I was going to drop dead of a heart attack right in the middle of the path.

As I tried to stop shaking and text Daddy that I needed him, a coldness wrapped around me. This didn't fit with any of my usual panic symptoms. With the cold came sadness, worry, and some unnameable feeling that made me tremble harder. No wind blew, and the sun shone and warmed the Mississippi air to an almost uncomfortably warm degree, but I wished I had my denim jacket to help with this chill.

A quick look around told me no one else was cold—no one was huddling deeper into their shirts or walking close together for warmth. All around, clusters of kids were laughing with each other, digging around in their backpacks, looking down at their phones. All the other students looked completely normal. No one looked like anything was wrong at all until my gaze landed on an extremely out of place woman staring at me from across the quad. She was nestled into a cluster of magnolia trees.

She stood tall. *Too* tall. Her face screwed up like she'd just smelled a really rank piece of rotten meat but was trying not to show it. Her blouse and long skirt looked like something a grandmother in a movie would wear. She had her hands tightly clasped in front of her, and her hair lay flat against her head and hung limply down her back and around her shoulders. She looked gaunt—a sad gray sheen to her glistening skin, caved-in cheeks, and a shine to her eyes.

More fitting than *gaunt*, my new favorite word: *ghastly*. My sister, Egypt, had bought me *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, plus a bunch of other weird books, before she left for college. A bribe, Mama called it, so I wouldn't be upset over being left behind. I read it and reread it dozens of times to try and soothe myself whenever I missed her. We had talked about how when she was my age, she thought it said *ghastly* and explained to me what it meant. We spent the whole week before she left calling all

sorts of things ghastly—our cat Walter’s poops, a tacky painting Mama found at a yard sale, some shoes at a store in the mall. But this woman, this ghastly woman, fit the word best of all. She looked just like one of Edward Gorey’s creepy drawings.

The other kids ignored her—no talking, no waves, no acknowledgment at all. Almost like they were afraid of her. But I couldn’t stop staring. Something about her . . .

As I stared, I forgot all about panicking, or losing the adults, or even being cold. I tried to drag my eyes away from her but couldn’t. And as much as it scared me, neither did hers. But that chill came back quickly as I watched her mouth start to move. I shouldn’t have been able to hear her from as far off as she was, but her whispered voice slithered into my ear just as she began to raise an arm. She aimed her index finger straight at me.

“Home . . .”