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Beneath the Willow

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It was my tenth birthday. It was midday and the sun was high. Sweat was pouring off my face and my bathing suit under my sundress was drenched. I couldn't wait until after cake to go over to the neighbors with my sister, Abby, so we could swim. I watched as Abby stirred the cake batter in the bowl and then she added another egg.

"Where is Mom and Dad?" I asked.

"Outside on the swing." She nodded her head towards the big bay window that gazed upon the front porch.

I walked over and pulled the curtain back. They seemed engrossed in conversation. I shrugged and plopped back onto the couch. I yawned as I sank further into the plush cushions.

"I love you, Abby."

"I love you too, squirt."

I heard a commotion in the kitchen as I began to wake. I didn't even know I had fallen asleep. After my eyes adjusted to their opening, I realized my parents were sitting at the kitchen table and something was wrong. My mom's voice was high-pitched, and her face had mascara running down it. My dad held one of her hands and with his other he rubbed her back. The bowl of batter was still on the counter.

I glanced into the dining room; it was empty. I walked to each of the bedrooms, the bathroom and the laundry room. No Abby. *Where could she be?*

"Avery, come here." My mom pointed to the couch and I did what I was told. This time the cushions weren't comfortable. They didn't feel warm and inviting like they had earlier in the day.

"Where's Abby?" I asked.

"Abby went out to get the mail and never came back. We called the police after we walked the property looking for her. They are looking for her also. There are no signs of her anywhere. I don't know if she ran off or got taken, but either way, it's not looking good," said my dad as his eyes darted around the room.

"But—"

"—But it's going to be okay. They're gonna find her. Go on, go finish your cake," my mom said as she kissed my head and shushed me straight into the kitchen. I had no desire to finish baking the cake, but I knew Abby would want me to. I poured the batter into the glass cake pan and turned on the oven. I didn't even wait for it to preheat. I shoved the pan into the oven and set the timer. I sunk back into the cushions of the couch, wishing they would just swallow me whole.

###

The cake finished, cooled and was frosted. All three of us gathered around the wooden kitchen table. Abby's seat was empty, but I still sat a plate there. My mom grabbed it and put it back in the cupboard. The glass clanked against each other as the plate settled back into its home. I cringed.

"No need to waste a plate. If she comes back, we'll grab it back out."

I ate my cake in silence. I didn't even taste any of the vanilla frosting that Abby had made earlier in the day. Her frosting was the best. She promised to show me one day how she made it, but, had yet to do so. I hoped she was still able to.

I went to my room to get ready for bed. I pulled on my night gown. It was navy blue with a white ribbon on the collar. Abby and I had the same ones. I would normally brush my teeth but had no desire to do so. Abby tucked me in every night. She would hum while she did it. I never knew what the song was that she was humming, but it was beautiful.

I climbed under the covers and was about to pull them up to my chin when I felt something push them tightly up under my legs and arms. There was no one there. I felt warmth graze my forehead, like a kiss. Then the humming started. It was her song; her hum.

Find me.

The voice was all around me in the room. I started shivering. I was so cold. I eventually fell into an unsettled sleep. I started to dream. Everything around me was dark. I was still freezing. I rubbed my arms with my hands as I embraced myself, trying to warm.

Find me. Find me. Find me.

It was Abby. The air around me in the darkness felt arctic and damp. I was approaching something. I squinted my eyes, but I could barely see. As I got closer, my eyes adjusted, and I

saw the giant willow. The one where the field ends. I reached out to touch it and was jolted awake.

I was drenched in sweat and my breath came heavy. I glanced out our tiny window at the top of the wall and saw the sun had risen. I couldn't shake what I had just seen in my sleep or the fact that on the other side of the room Abby's bed remained empty.

#

As the weeks moved on, we still did everything as normal. My chores were always done. It was summer break from school, so my mom gave me extra ones. Dinners were now quieter than ever. Abby's spot remained empty. It was a nightly reminder that she was most likely never coming home. But I still hoped.

"So, I was wondering if the police had any leads on Abby being gone?"

"Why?" asked my mom as she raised a concerning eyebrow at me.

"Well, it's been three weeks and she is still gone."

"Baby, I know you want your sister back. I want her back too. We look for her every night and the police are still looking. Just keep praying for her to come home, okay?" She grabbed my hand and squeezed it tightly. She pulled it to her mouth and planted a kiss on it. My father put his hand on her shoulder in reassurance.

"I promise." She released my hand and started clearing the table. I got up and helped.

What if I never see her again?

#

It's my seventeenth birthday. I hated every birthday I ever had after she disappeared. Each one reminded me of her being gone. They became harder and harder to celebrate.

My parents decided to take me to the ice cream parlor that was in the middle of town. I hadn't been for years, so I was glad to get out of the house for the day. They got me a hot dog, loaded with mustard and a strawberry cone. On the ride back we almost seemed like a normal family. Almost.

We were driving past the group of trees that lined the edge of the field by our house. I glanced over and saw the willow. The one in my dreams. It was like the wind was knocked out of me.

I gulped loud.

"Avery, are you okay?" my dad asked. He eyes full of worry stared at me in the rearview mirror.

There was someone standing under the willow. I couldn't make out their face but I was consumed by a need to go there. Goosebumps formed on my skin and suddenly I was freezing. *It's just from the ice cream.*

"I want to walk to the willow," I said.

"What? No, you don't need to walk to the willow. It's not safe," my mom said as she stopped dead in her tracks before unlocking our front door. Her face turned white as if she had seen a ghost.

"I saw someone under the willow on the drive home. Who do you suppose that was?"

"You were probably just seeing things. I think it's best if you just stay inside today."

"Why?"

"Because I said. You are never to go to the willow. I have heard terrible things about that forest. Things young ones shouldn't hear."

"Well, I am not a young one," I chuckled. She didn't find it funny.

"Avery Lee. You are not to go to the willow. Am I making myself clear?"

"Yes ma'am."

###

A few nights passed and I was in the midst of my most vivid Abby dream yet. Without even thinking, I got up and put my clothes and shoes on. I was going to the willow. I had to.

I crept quietly through the living room, placing each foot down softly to avoid making any noise. I got to the front door and started to turn the handle slowly. I thought I heard something move in the kitchen and turned to look. Nothing. As I started to turn the handle again, an apparition of Abby was to my right. Her skin was hollow, and it looked as if it were peeling away from her bones. She had no eyes, just dark, empty sockets. She opened her mouth wide and the words "find me" came barreling out as a horrific, blood curdling scream. I jumped and screamed at the top of my lungs. Abby disappeared. My parents came running out into the living room.

"What the hell is going on out here?" my mom asked, as she rubbed her eyes.

"Mom, I just saw Abby. She was standing right there." I couldn't catch my breath.

"What are you talking about? Where?"

She nodded to my dad and he grabbed the shot gun out of the coat closet. He went outside.

"She was right here. Right next to me. She looked — dead."

"Avery, I think you are seeing things. Are you okay? What were you even doing out here anyway?"

"I don't know," I lied.

"Well get back to bed."

I went back to my room, my heart still thumping in my throat and I crawled under the covers. I balled myself up and cried myself to sleep. That night was a dreamless sleep.

#

The next day, I woke up and did my chores. I needed to take the trash out but saw that it was pouring. My mom was napping, and my dad was at work, so I decided to put the trash in the cellar until it subsided. I carried the bag to the cellar and went to turn the handle to go in. It was locked.

Strange.

I shrugged my shoulders and went to grab the key hanging below the mail rack near the front door. I walked back to the cellar and put the key in the handle. I turned it and opened the cellar. It was dark. I turned on the light and carried the bag down the stairs.

I looked around. I hadn't been in the cellar since I was very little. I never had a reason to. My parents wouldn't let me come down here anyway. They told me there were things that could hurt me, so I avoided it. As I looked around, I found rope. It was frayed on the ends. I picked it up and took a closer look.

"What the—" I dropped it. There was blood caked on it. I could tell it was old by the deep red color. I noticed something in the corner. I walked over and there was a blue tarp. I lifted it. There was more rope and a girl's shoe.

I picked up the shoe. It wasn't mine. *Was it Abby's?* It was white with little pink flowers on it. Looked like it belonged to someone younger. If it was Abby's I couldn't remember it. I turned it over and there was blood on one side. I dropped it.

Next thing I knew I felt someone come up from behind and grab me. A cloth was placed over my mouth. I tried to fight them off, but everything went dark.

#

I didn't know how much time had passed, but I slowly began to wake. I tried to reach up and rub my eyes, but I realized I was tied to the staircase.

"What is going on here? I need to get out."

I started to rub the rope as hard as I could against the wood of the stairs. Faster and faster until I was sure I was making progress. It seemed like an eternity passed but finally I was free.

Find me.

"I'm trying."

I looked around the room and saw a door hidden behind a shelf. The shelf was full of half used paint cans and painting supplies. I hurriedly put the cans on the ground and pushed the shelf away from the door. It took all my strength, but I opened it. It was another room. It was dark and I could barely see. Something towards the back was shining. I made my way into the dark towards whatever the light was. As I got close to it, I realized it was a window. It was covered in paint. The barn light was shining through a small crack in the paint and I could hear the rain beating against it. It was tiny. I knew I would barely fit, if at all, but I had to try.

The window was locked, and the lock had been painted over. There was no way I was going to be able to unlock it, so I went back out to the other room and grabbed the shovel. I rammed the shovel handle into the painted glass of the window. It didn't break. I tried again. Still nothing. Finally, on the third try it shattered into pieces. I heard the cellar door being unlocked and stepped up onto the worktable that was just below the window. I reached my hands through the narrow opening and grabbed onto the wet ground, losing my grip. I fell backwards onto the table. The glass around the edge started to cut into my arms and the smell of blood mixed with rain invaded my nose.

Eventually, I pushed myself through the shards and out into the yard. I stood up and started to run. My mother was right behind me, screaming words that I couldn't understand. The willow wouldn't let me turn back. Its power was too strong. I couldn't fight it. The willow began to glow a bright dazzling white, like a beacon calling to me. As I got closer, I could see the ground beneath it moving like waves and it was making an odd gurgling noise.

I made it the edge of the field. I looked back and my mother had almost caught up to me.

"Let me go!" I screamed at her and stepped over the line where the field ended, and the tree line began.

"Avery! No!!" My mother stopped at the edge of the field. She fell to her knees and put her hands up to her head, cradling it as she started to bawl.

I ran over to the willow. The light welcomed me, like a warm blanket on a cold winter's night. I reached my hand out. I wanted to touch it. I needed to touch it.

"Avery, don't. It's a trap. If you touch that tree, they will take you like they took your sister."

"What are you talking about?"

Find me. Abby's voice was so close.

"This is why I never wanted you to come here. I had to protect you. Please, Avery."

"Protect me from what?"

"The dark spirits. She is one of them now."

"What happened to me in the cellar?"

"I was just trying to protect you. The spirits will stop at nothing to get what they want. I had to lock your sister down there too. She wanted to go to the willow. I had to stop her. I put her down there to save her, but she escaped. She went to the willow and never came back."

I stood there, the rain drenching me as I stared at my mother. The glow from the tree bounced off the raindrops on her cheek. She almost looked angelic. I wanted to believe her, but the willow wouldn't let me.

Find me! The voice was deeper now and slightly demonic. It forced its way into my ears as I inched towards the tree.

"I don't believe you."

"Avery, please. I love you. Everything was to protect you. I couldn't lose you both." My mother started weeping harder. She put her hands together, as if in prayer. "Please don't take my baby."

She stood up. I reached towards the tree and just as I was about to touch it, my mother came up behind me and pushed me to the ground.

"I said don't take my baby!" My mother placed her hands on the tree and an explosive sound echoed throughout the forest. The light became so bright that I couldn't keep my eyes open.

Moments passed and the forest went dark. All that could be heard was the sound of the rain hitting the leaves.

"Mom!" I looked around. My mother was gone. The tree turned dark and looked just like all the others. I started to cry. I glanced across the field and saw my father's truck lights pulling into the drive.

"Dad! Dad! Help!"

My father started running across the field as I ran towards him. I fell into his arms and started sobbing. The rain stopped, and the sky cleared. My dad scooped my soaked body up and carried me home. He wrapped me in a blanket and laid me on my bed. I slept.

###

The next morning the sunlight seized my room. I sat up and rubbed my eyes. *What a weird dream.* I realized I was still in the same clothes from the night before. I picked out an outfit and showered. I walked through the house trying to find my parents. After searching every room, I sat down on the couch. The air turned to ice so I wrapped a blanket around myself.

Find me. It was my mother's voice.

The End