





**No one ever leaves Copper Hollow.**

No one really questions why. We don't have much, but everything we need is right here. Nothing is great, but nothing is terrible either. Nothing bad ever happens here. It's Copper Hollow. It's always been the same.

Some people might get bored, but not me. Not with my imagination. I can transform any situation into an adventure. I can make even a sleepy old town like Copper Hollow seem exciting. At least, that's what I tell myself. When the summer days are super long, or when I realize that this day feels exactly the

same as the one before, I try to use my imagination to make everything new again. Most of the time, it works. There are times, though, when it feels like even my imagination isn't enough.

It's like a part of me is waiting for something. A *real* adventure. A real thrill.

But Copper Hollow never changes. There are no real adventures. No true thrills.

At least, not until the doll appears. Then everything changes.

Maybe I should have tried leaving Copper Hollow earlier . . . while I had a chance.



**“Captain Kimberly, our ship is sinking!”**

Alicia’s voice calls out to me, the cannons firing all around us and the smell of burning wood and sea salt in the air. James is high up in the crow’s nest while Alicia fires our own cannons at the Empire’s ships and I control the great steering wheel. I survey the many ships around us and shout out their locations to Alicia and James. “Starboard! Three o’clock!” Alicia tries to follow my commands, tries to aim her cannon at the ships, but we are surrounded. She can’t fire fast enough. We are the final vessel of our fleet, and the

Empire's cannons are too strong, too many. Our ship shudders.

Alicia is right. We're sinking.

"Abandon ship!" I yell out to her, steering our great vessel away from the Empire's fleet. I know we can't make it, but I want to try to get James and Alicia to safety.

"We won't leave you!" James calls out.

"Never!" Alicia responds, blasting a hole through the side of another enemy craft.

I smile at my brave crew. Always there at my side. Always there, to the bitter end. I change course—straight into the heart of the Empire's navy.

"Then let's give them the fight of the century!" I yell.

Alicia and James cheer. We steady ourselves, prepare for one last hurrah—

And James's watch begins to beep.

"Aww, no," Alicia huffs.

James says, "How is it dinnertime already?"

He stops the alarm on his watch and frowns from atop the derelict fountain. The sculpture is twice as tall as he is, which means it's a great lookout spot for

whatever story I'm telling. I stand on the other side of the overgrown gardens, holding an old bicycle tire, while Alicia sits on the balustrade, a piece of plastic pipe on her shoulder.

This abandoned place is ours. No adults for miles around to tell us to stop playing make-believe or yell at us to be careful and not to climb on things. No adults, no rules, which means no limitations to what my friends and I can dream up. In the entire town, this is the one place that actually feels *fun*. At least, for me. James and Alicia don't always feel the same way, but they know we can do whatever we want out here, so they usually agree with any plan I have.

I take the last step out of my story and let my imagination fade into reality. The ships are all gone now, replaced by trees and ruins. The sun sits just above the tree line, casting sharp shadows over the wild backyard.

Over the last few years, the forest has closed in on this old property, like it's claiming back the land. Vines twist over every surface, and trees and saplings poke up from the gardens while birds roost in the enormous fountain in the center of it all.

I can almost imagine how this place once was—owned by some rich mining family, perhaps, the lawns all neatly mowed, the gardens filled with beautiful flowers and apple trees. Everyone walking around in fancy dresses or suits, holding parasols to keep out the hot summer sun. I've dreamed up stories about this place many times, making my friends pretend we are royalty, all money and drama. I have a feeling, though, that my imagination doesn't come close to how amazing this place actually was.

I squint and pretend, the mansion this garden belongs to stretching grandly in front of me, all glittering windows and white columns and flowers dripping from trellises. Then I blink again, and I'm staring at the burned-out husk of a devastated building. Most of the top floor is gone from the fire, though there are parts we can still reach. The once-white walls are charred black and crisped brown, windows gaping and shadowed.

The whole place is full of shadows.

I have no idea who lived there, or what happened. No one seems to know.

No one seems to come here.

Just us.

“What are you having for dinner?” Alicia asks, hopping off the balustrade. She sets her makeshift cannon lovingly beside a patch of dandelions.

“I don’t know,” James says. “I think my parents are making spaghetti.”

“Yum,” Alicia replies. “Mine are making tacos.”

There’s a moment of silence when I don’t say anything. They know what that means—my mom is at work again, which means I’ll be eating alone. Again.

I wait for them to say, *Hey, Kimberly, do you want to come over for dinner?* They don’t. They never have.

It hurt my feelings at first, but I got over it fast. They’re still my best and only friends, so I can’t really complain when they don’t have me over to their houses. It’s not like I can really invite them over to mine. I’ve never heard them invite each other over either.

This summer, we’ve stuck to the woods.

Here, there’s always an adventure to be had.

I set the bicycle tire beside our cannon while James climbs down from the fountain.

“Same time tomorrow?” I ask.

“Definitely,” Alicia replies. “Maybe tomorrow we’ll blast off into space.”

“Or explore a haunted house,” I venture. We all look at the abandoned mansion.

The last time we played haunted house, we got so scared that we couldn’t return to the mansion for weeks. It didn’t help that we disturbed a flock of birds while playing. Their caws sounded like laughing ghosts as they flew off, knocking down statues and ceramics in their kerfuffle.

“Maybe not a haunted house,” I say. “We could play castle?”

Again, they look uneasily at the mansion.

“Maybe,” Alicia says. “Or we could do a scavenger hunt in the woods!”

“That would be a lot of fun,” James chimes in.

I begrudgingly agree.

They’re scared of the mansion.

I’m intrigued by it.

The truth is, the only reason they’ve ever gone near the mansion is because I convinced them to. It was so strange—the first time we walked past, it was

like they didn't even see it. I had to get them so close that they were practically walking into the walls. Then they startled, as if I'd blindfolded them and was finally allowing them to open their eyes. It took a lot of convincing to get them to go inside, and even now it's like they forget it exists unless I bring it up.

I don't understand why they're so frightened of it. It's just a burned-down building. The worst thing we've ever seen inside was a dead rat.

And damage. So much damage. But none of it is from vandals—there's no graffiti or broken bottles here. Just nature.

Damage by fire.

Damage from weathering countless storms and scorching summers.

Damage by years of neglect.

Even though it's broken, even though it could be dangerous, I love the mansion. I want to know everything about it.

Who lived here?

When was it destroyed?

What happened to it?

Why isn't the rest of our town so grand?

As Alicia and James start walking away, I think maybe I'll come out again tomorrow on my own if they're too scared. I can pretend to be a princess locked away in her tower, waiting for her knight to come home. Or I can be the brave knight storming the castle, rescuing my waiting prince . . . Yeah, I like that version better. I just need to find a good sword and shield.

I take one last look at the mansion before we tread down the path back to Copper Hollow.

It seems to be smiling at me. The black-window eyes, the crooked stone teeth of the front porch.

As if it knows I will always return.

As if it knows I can't escape its pull.