

TREASURE FOREST

BOOK ONE
OF
The Forest Inside Trilogy

Cat Bordhi



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without disturbing the water?”

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To you, the reader:

*May you discover the ever-present grace of *The Forest Inside**



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DOWN
THE DRAIN

Through his wet eyes, Ben's unfinished map looked as blurry as his future. He paced back and forth in his small bedroom, clenching the hand-made drawing. How could Grandma Daphne be dead when he could almost hear the whisper of her voice, and sniff the freshly baked ginger cookies in her kitchen? And that breeze that filled her white curtains until they danced like ghosts now seemed to be billowing through his room, lifting the hairs on the back of his neck. Suddenly an ambulance screamed past his house with a merciless howl, shattering his reverie and leaving him shaking. There had been no ambulance to save his grandmother. Not in the forest. If only it had happened when she was visiting them here in the city, she might still be alive.

During the long months of seventh grade, Ben had dreamed of the forest by spending hours painstakingly filling one half of a large white sheet of paper with familiar details: the steep cliffs and springs of Mount Portal, winding pathways, creeks, the cedar throne, disappearing deer trails, the giant boulder that had split in two so you could walk through it, the pond, and the towering fir tree he'd climbed last year to watch ravens playing in the sky and to see beyond his grandmother's side of the forest. Down the middle of the paper he'd drawn the ravine and swamp that divided the forest into his grandmother's side, where he and his younger sister Sara spent summers exploring; and the far side, forbidden and dangerous. Until now he had kept his promise to his grandmother and never set foot in it.

At the sound of a knock, Ben folded the map and hid it inside a book.

“Ben?” Sara, wrapped in a blanket, her freckled face puffy and her eyes red and swollen, appeared in the open door. “I can’t sleep,” she sniffled. “Can I come in?”

“I guess.”

Sara pushed the door closed with her long toes and curled into a ball on the floor. Her white rabbit, Bijou, poked his head out of the blanket to sniff the air. Then he squeezed out one paw with a black mark on it that looked like a single clover leaf with a stem, and squirmed free, revealing another black mark, this one on his left hip, that resembled three clover leaves, without a stem.

“What’s going to happen?” Sara’s voice came out in a squeak. “Who’ll take us to the forest now? Mom hates it there.”

“Maybe Dad,” replied Ben. “I’d rather go alone anyway.”

“How could she have died?” cried Sara.

“Heart attacks just happen,” Ben muttered, pushing his dark hair out of his eyes. “You’d better go back to bed now.”

“How will we spend the summer at Grandma Daphne’s without her?”

“I have no idea. In case you haven’t noticed, I can’t sleep either.”

“I miss her!” sobbed Sara.

* * *

DURING the week after her death, Grandma Daphne’s empty house in the forest received several visitors. Right now there were two. One was hiding at the edge of the meadow, watching the other visitor, who was just leaving.

Archie stepped out onto the front porch, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. Daggett waited until the white-haired man set down his tattered briefcase and began to shuffle through his keys, then threw back his head and let loose with a string of piercing coyote howls. From the far side of the forest his pack responded with a lunatic symphony of yips, shrieks, and screams. Archie froze, and the keys dangling from his motionless hand ceased moving as if they too were stunned. The sun slid behind a dark cloud, abandoning the man to clammy coldness, and a menacing growl rumbled across the meadow. Seizing his briefcase,

which caught on a nail and gave way with a ripping sound, Archie lurched towards his car and fled, having quite forgotten to lock the house.

Once the engine’s sound faded, Daggett trotted out of hiding, padding over the spring grasses that were just beginning to shoot up. As he passed beneath the apple tree, two pink petals fell on his gray, straggly hair. Another crept beneath his collar.

This was too easy. He pulled the door open and left it swinging, creaking on its rusty hinges, and began to prowl through the two-story wooden house. In the dim hallway he stared at a fading black and white photograph on the wall. For a moment the sinister expression on his face dissolved, and his eyes softened around the memory they held. Then a tremor of anger rushed through him. His breath quickened, and he moved on. He searched the bookcase in the living room and removed a small volume, tucking it inside his patched jacket, ignoring the basket beside Daphne’s spinning wheel. Behind his back, something rotated slowly beneath its green cloth.

In the kitchen he turned the faucet on full blast and grinned at the sight of the clear water swirling down the drain, back into the earth. The well would run dry. With luck, the pump would burn out as well. He studied Daphne’s shelf of homemade preserves, dropped a jar in each pocket, and stepped out the back door, leaving it swinging. A black fly buzzed inside as Daggett slipped out, and a moment later, the lanky man vanished into the forest, back across the swamp to his home.

A WILL, AND THE
DEAREST FRESHNESS
DEEP DOWN
THINGS

“Fill her up and check under the hood, will you, Roy? I’m going inside for coffee.”

“Sure thing, Archie,” the attendant replied.

The café door swung shut with a bang, and the waitress looked up. “Morning, Archie. Breakfast?”

“Just coffee today, Sylvia. I’m driving up to the city.” Archie nodded at a deputy sitting at the

counter. “Morning, Joe.”

“Hey, Archie.”

“Say, Joe, do me a favor, would you? Keep an eye on Daphne’s house if you’re out that way? I’ve got an uneasy feeling about it.”

Joe gave a short laugh. “Sure. But what could happen? Nothing ever happens around here.”

“So why wasn’t Daphne’s daughter at the memorial service?” asked Sylvia, handing Archie his coffee. “Went all through school with her, would’ve been nice to see her again.”

“Lily didn’t much like it here,” muttered Archie. “Real uncomfortable. Guess they had a private service for Daphne in the city.”

“Lily always was a little spooked,” said Sylvia. “High-tailed it out of here the minute she graduated, like she couldn’t wait to escape Cedarwood.”

Archie sighed. “I remember. Not sure what’s going to happen now.” He started for the door. “You’ll check on the house?” he asked Joe again.

“Yup. Don’t worry about a thing,” replied the deputy.

* * *

“BEN, Sara,” Lily Maclennon explained, “this is Grandma’s lawyer, Archie Greenwalt. He’s come all the way from Cedarwood.”

“Weren’t you one of my grandma’s friends?” asked Ben.

“We’ve heard stories about you,” said Sara, looking curiously at the stranger. She pushed her apricot-colored hair behind her slender ears.

Archie smiled. “Your Grandma Daphne and I were friends ever since childhood. I helped her with legal matters as well.” He put a warm hand on Ben’s shoulder. “You were a just a little guy, maybe two years old, when I moved away eleven years ago.” Ben shuffled his feet in embarrassment and shoved his oversized hands in his pockets.

Turning to Sara, Archie added, “And you—you were just taking your first steps. My, but you look just like your grandmother did at your age. You must be what, twelve?” Sara nodded. “Looking at you brings back memories.” He stared at Sara until tears came into his eyes. “Ever since I returned last fall, I watched Daphne counting the days until your summer visit.” His face drooped and his voice grew hoarse. “She didn’t quite make it. I am so, so sorry.”

“Could we maybe live with you this summer?” asked Sara. “We *have* to spend our summers there.”

“Sara, really!” cried Lily. “Go on, you two. Go find something else to do.”

“Actually,” Archie said, “Ben and Sara are named in the will, so they need to stay.”

“I see. Shall we sit down?” Lily wiped her eyes and nodded to her husband, Peter, who pulled out a chair for their guest.

“Tea?” Lily asked, her deceased mother’s china teapot poised above a mismatched set of cups. A bead of water began to swell at the bottom of a hairline fracture on the porcelain pot, and fell to form a tiny damp circle on the tablecloth.

“Yes, please.” The quiet that followed was embroidered with the tinkle of the last cup being filled. “A fine woman she was,” Archie murmured. His fingers twitched, and at the sound



of crinkling paper, everyone's eyes darted from his face to the will in his hands.

Archie took a sip. "Daphne insisted on writing her last will and testament in her own words."

To my daughter Lily, I leave the home you grew up in. Please consider living there with Sara, Ben, and Peter for a year or two, before deciding what to do with it.

Lily gasped. Ben and Sara threw her an eager look, and when Sara began to speak, Ben kicked her under the table. Archie looked up at Lily, his eyes scanning her face as if searching for clues in the pages of a book he'd read a long, long time ago. He sighed, and turned back to the will.

It's not that far from the city, so Peter can travel back and forth as needed for conducting his business. There should be enough money left in my bank account so that you can take a few years off from teaching if you like. Sara and Ben could attend the same small school in the village as you did, or you could teach them yourself for a year if that suits you better.

I promised the grandchildren I'd try to fix things so they could always be here. They love the forest and Mount Portal like I do, and like their Grandpa Henry, who they never knew, also did. You could say it's a family tradition. Now that I am gone, I hope you'll keep my promise alive, and that the house and land will always stay in the family. Since I am leaving the property in your hands, it is now up to you.

Lily, we are all safe here. You knew that when you were a little girl, and then you changed. If you will just watch your children and learn from them, you can rediscover what you knew once. It is my final wish for you.

Lily stared at her children as if they had suddenly been replaced by alien doubles.

To Sara and Ben I leave the enclosed envelopes.

Archie hoisted his elbow to point at two bulging, oversized white envelopes beside his cup.

They are to be allowed to open them privately, without being asked to share what is inside. I also leave each of my grandchildren the sum of \$100, which they may spend without comment or interference from anyone. Children, as always, I trust you to honor the boundaries in the forest and not go beyond them.

To Peter I leave my collection of poetry books. Some may need rebinding; I know you will take care of them with your wonderful talent for reviving what the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins called "the dearest freshness deep down things."

Lily, it is that heavenly dearest freshness deep down in things that Ben and Sara know so well from their summers here in the forest, and that you must find and trust once again. I am not blind to your terror. I know our house and the forest bring back memories. But I beg you to take the risk of facing your nightmares so your children can continue to grow here in their heaven. Ben and Sara are on the threshold of discovering the forest's deepest treasure within themselves, so that they can be with it anywhere. But unless they have more time here, I fear they may lose their way, and have to go through much suffering to earn this knowledge again. Do not let Ben and Sara suffer as you have, my dear. Let them flower here in their heaven while you discover that your nightmares are imaginary.

To Archie Greenwalt, I leave the bag of steel jacks we used to play with when we were young. You can't get good jacks like that anymore. You'll have to buy a new red rubber ball yourself. Thank you for your friendship and help all these years.

"Not the jacks!" cried Lily. "I need those. They—they're the last thing I had before—"

Archie looked at her with surprise, then slowly nodded his head. "Oh, yes, of course," he said, "I don't need the jacks. I want you to have them." He exhaled and stared into his cup. "The paperwork will take a few more weeks, but you could move in anytime you like. Well, once school is out." He looked up. "That is, if you decide to." The echoes of coyote cries were creeping through him and biting at the spaces between his heartbeats. He tried to shake it away.

"We'll go, won't we?" begged Sara.

Lily collected the cups and carried them to the sink. Peter threw a troubled glance in his wife's direction, and stuffed his hands in his pockets. "We'll think it over. There's quite a bit to consider," he said and shook Archie's hand. "Thank you for coming. And for letting my wife have the jacks."

Archie smiled. "It's quite a game. Daphne could play for round after round, picking off twosies and threesies, never bumping the others, like magic. It was a spectator sport, playing with her, it was. I hardly ever got a turn, because she never missed."

"Will you play jacks with us when we move into Grandma Daphne's house?" Sara asked Archie.

"I hope we can do that," he replied. "You and your brother may just have some of her magic in you." He smiled awkwardly at Lily, who had wrapped her arms tightly around herself, tears dropping from her haunted eyes. "I'll be in touch," Archie assured her. "It's a long drive back, so I'd best be on my way. Please let me know if there's anything at all I can do. If you decide to move, we'll be just a few miles apart, and I hope you'll think of me as a nearby friend."

"Call me when you're ready to play jacks, eh?" He winked at the children and let Peter usher him out of the room.

The two men stopped to talk behind the closed door of Peter's workroom. Ben tiptoed into the adjacent bathroom and locked the door. So he could hear better, he took the toilet paper roll and laid it flat against the wall, and then pressed his ear over the hole. Through the small round chamber he could clearly hear Archie speaking.

"Don't you worry about that old hermit. Daggett stays in his part of the forest," Archie said. There were muttered words from Peter, and then Archie spoke again. "I know. No one's ever been able to get Lily to talk about it." Archie's voice dropped, and Ben couldn't make out what he said next. But he could hear them opening the workroom door, so he switched his toilet paper spying device over to the other wall.

"Are these old family pictures?" Archie was asking. He must be looking at Ben's dad's collection of sepia portraits in the entry.

"Some of them," said Peter. "It's what I do for a living. Resurrect lost images in old photographs, restore antique books and old letters, manuscripts, that kind of thing."

"Daphne hung on to a lot of memorabilia," commented Archie. "Attic's full of it. Photos, letters, newspaper clippings, and more. From way back."

"I've seen a bit of it," said Peter. "Thanks for coming, Archie. I'll be in touch."