

VELMA

“JINKIES!” I WHISPER-SHOUTED INTO the early morning darkness. There was only silence.

“Jinkies!” A little louder this time. Still, silence. Until . . . the soft crack of a twig. Padding footsteps. Then two yellow eyes, blinking out of the dark.

“Come here, you little monster.” I scooped up Jinkies, cuddled the fuzzy kitten tight, then deposited her inside with fresh bowls of food and water. The moment she smelled the food, she forgot my existence. Typical cat.

I know it violates every law of teenage life, but I have to admit: I like waking up early, the sky all pink and smeary with dawn, the whole world asleep. No one to see you, no one to judge you, no one to ask you why you are the way you are and not the way they want you to be. No one to look straight

THE VANISHING GIRL

through you without bothering to ask anything at all. Just Jinkies and me, up with the sun.

Our apartment was dead quiet. I tried to be quiet, too, though there wasn't much need. My mother worked the overnight shift and wouldn't be home for another couple hours. My father, who could sleep through a jackhammer, usually didn't get up till noon—which, okay, was reasonable on a Sunday. If I tell you he slept that late every day, though, and even once he got up usually stayed in his pj's for another couple hours, staring out the window or listening to depressing music and waiting for the time to pass, you might have some questions.

I had some questions. But I knew better than to ask them. The Dinkley house wasn't exactly a model of open and honest communication. We loved each other. But that didn't mean we knew how to talk to each other. Not about anything real.

When my grandmother was still alive, mornings were our time together. She would wake up even earlier than I did, and the smell of cinnamon toast or, if I was really lucky, chilaquiles, would drag me out of bed and into the kitchen. It was our secret Sunday ritual, just the two of us, talking at the table, about anything and everything—with her, there was no question I wasn't allowed to ask.

But that was a long time ago. Back when we lived in a house with plenty of bedrooms and a big backyard, instead of this tiny apartment where everything was always broken

and I slept on a futon shoved into an oversized closet and pretended it was a bedroom. Back when my parents both had jobs they loved and I had a best friend I loved and life was basically okay—back when I was too young to realize things could be any other way.

Jinkies's little hide-and-seek act had almost made me late for work, but I pedaled faster than the rickety old bike had ever managed to go, and showed up right on time (if a little bit sweaty). The Crystal Cove Haunted Village wasn't exactly a village, but then, it wasn't haunted, either, at least as far as I knew. Truth in advertising wasn't really what they were going for.

What they were going for: A tacky, tourist-revenue-generating combination of educational historical exhibits and hair-raising amusement park rides fueled by a steady stream of greasy food, sugary drinks, and all the overpriced crap your kid could beg you to buy. It was another reason to like the early mornings—on days when my shift started before the park opened, I could count on at least a couple hours free from little kids screaming and puking, rude customers expecting me to pretend they were right, and jerky jocks and their plastic girlfriends who ignored me in school but still expected me to slip them free pizza and ride tickets and thought it was hilarious to smear cotton candy in my hair or steal my glasses when I refused.

It's not exactly the part-time job you'd expect I would

THE VANISHING GIRL

have. If you saw me on the street, checked out the turquoise streak in my hair, the chunky glasses, the combat boots, you'd figure me for a record-store geek or some hipster clocking hours in an anarchist bookstore that smelled like incense. Not that there were any anarchist bookstores in Crystal Cove, or any record stores left, anywhere, but you get the picture. Working at the Haunted Village was sometimes dull, sometimes dirty, sometimes humiliating, almost always lame, but it was the best job I could get, and we needed the money. It also felt a little like home. Maybe because it used to be.

Long story.

Anyway, the Haunted Village was filled with fake 1850s-style stores (alongside all the real ones where you could buy your made-in-China souvenirs). It was my glamorous job to unlock them, turn on the lights, and make sure no animals had done any damage—or left any disgusting little treats behind—in the night. The giant gates at the entrance did a pretty good job keeping out any troublemaking humans, but the raccoons and coyotes still somehow found a way inside.

It was usually a pretty uneventful part of the job, and that Sunday started off no differently. The candle-making store was fine, the apothecary fine, the mining outfitter fine . . . and then came the sheriff's department. I stopped short just before opening the door. Something inside was yowling.

VELMA

It sounded like a wounded cat or a rabid raccoon or, well, I'm not really a nature girl so I had no idea what it sounded like, except like something I was in no hurry to meet.

I could have gone to get the night manager. But the night manager happened to be my mother, and I wasn't especially eager to get my mommy to do my job for me. I could also have gotten the day manager, but Jerry Printz was my mother's boss, and also an annoying twerp always looking for infractions to cite and pay to dock. It had taken me months to convince him I was responsible enough for this shift—I wasn't about to make it seem like I couldn't handle myself with an angry raccoon.

I unlocked the door, opened it, and—

Okay, I admit it.

I screamed.

Just for a second.

And only because the moment I opened the door, I realized that was no angry raccoon. It was a person. Screaming her head off. It startled me enough that I screamed back. Then I took a breath, and a closer look.

"Marcy?" I said. "What are you doing in there?"

It was definitely Marcy Heller, second-prettiest girl in the junior class—though she took first prize when it came to meanest, if you ask me—locked inside the fake jail cell. (Fake cell, real lock—the better to spook little kids with.) She was rattling the bars, shrieking at me to let her out.

THE VANISHING GIRL

I'd known Marcy my whole life—technically, we were second or third cousins, although in a town this small that's not much of an achievement—and I'd almost never seen her with a hair out of place. But that day, her hair was a rat's nest, her eyes were wild, her cheeks mascara streaked, her skin pale as a sheet of paper. She looked like . . . well, she looked like someone who'd spent the night alone trapped in a haunted jail. She looked scared out of her mind.

I fumbled for the keys, opened the doors of her cage. "Are you okay? What are you doing here?"

She didn't say anything.

"What happened, Marcy?" I put a hand on her shoulder, but she shrugged me off, hard.

"Like I'd tell *you*," she snapped. "Take me to see someone in charge."

That sounded a lot more like the Marcy I knew, the one who didn't think I counted.

"Fine," I said, and I made sure there wasn't a shred of concern in my voice. "Let's go."

I brought her to the managers' office, which technically belonged to Jerry Printz, but my mother got to squat in it during her overnight shift. Lucky her. She was still there, handing off the details of the night to Jerry. I introduced Marcy, who was suddenly looking a lot more upset again—the moment we walked into the office, she started crying so hard she couldn't speak. Which left me.

“I found her locked inside the jail,” I said. “I think she’s been in there most of the night.”

Marcy nodded.

“How would that possibly have happened?” Jerry turned to my mother. “You didn’t check before you closed down last night?”

“Of course I checked,” she said. “She wasn’t there when the park closed.”

Marcy sniffed and mumbled something that sounded like “after that.”

“How would you have gotten in here after hours, young lady?”

This time, Marcy’s answer was a lot clearer. “The gate was unlocked.”

Jerry’s glare swiveled back to my mother; it was the most basic part of her job to make sure all the park gates were locked at night. And she insisted she’d done so.

Which meant someone was mistaken, or someone was lying. Either way, I was absolutely sure that someone wasn’t my mother. Jerry Printz, on the other hand, didn’t look so sure.

“Velma, why don’t you leave us alone so we can get to the bottom of this.”

“Why should I leave when—”

“*Velma.*”

When my mother says my name in that tone of voice,

THE VANISHING GIRL

I know better than to argue. I left her there to fend for herself, which I knew was how she wanted it.

But I still felt like a total traitor.

* * *

Once the park opened, my job was to staff the register at the Pizza Panic booth. It was a good shift for a Sunday morning, because no one in their right mind wanted pizza for breakfast. Well, no one, except—

“Can I get, like, six slices, with extra olives, extra jalapeños, extra pineapple, extra anchovies, and, like, extra everything else you got?” That was Shaggy Rogers, for whom every time was pizza time. “And, like, some crusts for Scoob?” Shaggy grinned, and the Great Dane he brought with him everywhere barked hungrily.

“Hey, Scooby,” I said, like he was an old friend, which I guess technically he was. I’ve known Shaggy since we were six years old and Scooby-Doo was just a wriggly little puppy. Dogs weren’t allowed in the park, but somehow Shaggy had managed to wrangle himself an exception. My father would have said, *Like father, like son*—just like a Rogers to think the rules didn’t apply to him. But I thought it was just that everyone in town loved Scooby-Doo, or at least understood how much Shaggy loved him, and acted accordingly.

And of course, my father didn’t have much to say about anything these days.

“Don’t you think it’s a little early for pizza, Shaggy?”