THE CHIME SEEKERS



ROSS MONTGOMERY



WALKER BOOKS

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For Jules





Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faerie, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping
than you can understand.

– W. B. Yeats, "The Stolen Child"




Welcome to
FALLOW
HALL
Est. 1703
Please drive
carefully



The New House

Yanni hated the house the moment he saw it. It was nothing like their old house. Their old house was a ground-floor flat on a terraced street, tucked between homes on every side. It had a blue front door with gold numbers that led right from the street to the living room. There was just enough room for Yanni and Mum and Dad to live together. Being inside it felt like being hugged.

This house sat alone in an empty field, framed by cold October sky. It stuck out from the earth like it wasn't meant to be there. The front door was the colour of a rotten tooth.

"Our own driveway," said Mum, shaking her head. "I still can't believe it. It's going to change everything."

"And listen – do you hear that?" asked Dad.

Yanni listened, but the only sound he could hear was the rain prickling on the car roof and the *slack, slack, slack* of wipers on the windscreen.

"Silence," said Dad blissfully. "You could make all the noise you wanted out here, and no one would ever notice."

Yanni wasn't sure why this was a good thing. Places were *supposed* to be noisy: it meant people were close. He peered out of the rain-streaked car windows and searched the fields surrounding them. He had never been anywhere so empty, so flat, so close to the ground before. It made the sky look enormous, pressing down like a vast set of hands. There were no other houses.

"You said it was a village," muttered Yanni.

Mum pointed down the road. "Fallow Hall's ten minutes that way. You're going to love it, Yanni! There's a little square and a church – and the bus stop, of course. You'll be using that every day after half-term's over!"

Yanni's hairs stood on end. *Riddleton.* His new school. He'd be joining halfway through the first term, weeks behind everyone else. The move was supposed to have been finished months ago, but it had been delayed so many times that Yanni had been forced to start at another secondary back home, before leaving after a few weeks. The teachers hadn't even bothered to learn his name.

He stared at the ugly house, the grey sky, the barren fields. This was where he lived now. He'd left behind his friends and everything he had ever known for … *this*?

"Right!" said Dad. "The movers will be here soon. Let's see how the decorators have got on!"

He reached for the ignition. Mum shot out a hand to stop him, her eyes wide and desperate.

"No! She needs at least another—"

It was too late. Dad had turned the key. The car fell silent – and then filled with a blood-curdling scream that sang off the windows and shook the air.

"I'm sorry," Dad whispered. "I'm so, so sorry."

Mum slumped weakly in her seat. "Oh God. That's it. That's it for the rest of the afternoon."

Yanni glared at the screaming lump beside him. There – squirming away in her car seat like the Queen of all Maggots – was the reason they had moved to this horrible place.

Ari.

Yanni's baby sister had arrived one year ago, screaming, and she'd hardly paused for breath since. She screamed when she woke up; she screamed when you held her; she screamed when you put her down. The slightest thing would set her off – loud noises, quiet noises, medium-sized noises – and it had got even worse since she'd started teething. Now she kept Mum and Dad up until dawn, bleeding out their energy drop by drop, transforming them into zombies. They slept when they could; they ate when

they remembered. Sometimes Dad fell asleep while talking to Yanni, mid-sentence.

"Give her to me," said Dad wearily. "I'll put her in the sling for a bit."

"No, no, it's her teeth," said Mum. "Give her the ring."

"I don't have the ring, she threw it out the window."

"Oh God."

"Just get her a biscuit."

"Where are the biscuits?"

"In the bag."

"They're not here."

"No, the *bag* bag."

"This *is* the bag bag!"

Yanni sighed. Mum and Dad bickered all the time now. The house move had only made things worse.

No one made you move house, Yanni wanted to say. *No one made you have another baby.*

But he didn't; instead he let the words sink back down his throat and curdle in his stomach, and stepped outside into the hammering rain.

The house looked even worse than it did from the car: a hulking grim brick box, tired and ugly. The driveway turned into a cracked lane that led to the village. Yanni could see an old faded sign announcing that you were now entering Fallow Hall. Someone had put a statue at the base, a stone frog slumped over a toadstool with

a broken fishing rod. It looked sad, like everything else around here. One of its eyes was missing; the other one scowled at Yanni like it was annoyed to see him.

"Well, I don't want to be here, either," Yanni muttered.

It was true: Yanni had never wanted to leave his life behind. But now that Ari was here, their old house – their old, perfect little hug of a house – was too small. Mum and Dad couldn't afford a bigger place in town. That was when they started talking about moving to the countryside: they could have more space for less money; Dad could take a break from his job and look after Ari for a few years; Mum could start working again. His parents had been so excited that they made the decision without telling Yanni first.

They hadn't once asked him what he wanted. And now here he was, miles away from anything he'd ever known. He gazed down at his phone … and, sure enough, there was no reception. He couldn't even call his friends.

"So! What do you think, mate?"

Dad was standing by the car, trying to wrestle Ari into a baby sling. She was struggling against the straps for all she was worth, howling and flailing her chubby arms.

"I hate it," said Yanni.

"*Pfft!* Stop exaggerating," said Dad. "Think of how much space you'll have out here! And we've got family just around the corner in Riddleton, too. How good is that?"

Yanni bit his lip in frustration. "Dad – I don't know anything about Amy. I've told you a hundred times!"

Dad scoffed, narrowly avoiding Ari's flailing fists. "What do you mean, you don't know her? She's your cousin."

"Second cousin," said Yanni. "And she never even talks to me at those family things. She just … stands around, being weird."

Dad didn't reply. He'd finally got Ari in the sling, but she was writhing like a trapped salmon and booting him repeatedly in the groin. Dad sagged against the car, just letting it happen, like a cliff edge surviving a storm. He wasn't even listening any more.

Yanni sighed and walked into the house by himself. It never used to be like this. There was a time, before Ari was born, where *everything* had centred on what he wanted. Yanni had only to ask for something – a film night, a sleepover – and Mum or Dad would make it happen. Things hadn't been like that for a while now. These days, he felt like he had to fight just to be noticed.

The inside was, somehow, worse than the outside. The decorators had been here for weeks, painting the

walls and pulling out the old carpets, but it still looked like a set of barren rooms. Mum was standing by herself in a cavernous living room, grinning from ear to ear.

"Massive, isn't it?" she said.

"Freezing," said Yanni, with a shiver.

"It's these lovely big windows," said Mum happily. "They let the cold in. That's why we got the decorators to fix this up!"

She patted a huge stone fireplace beside her. It clearly hadn't been used in years: the inside was caked with cobwebs and dry leaves. A heavy iron panel had been ripped off the front, and now rested against the wall on one side. It made the fireplace look like a gaping mouth.

"Can you believe it?" she said. "They had a beautiful working fireplace, and they just blocked it up!"

Yanni shuddered. The fireplace wasn't beautiful at all: it was horrible. He wasn't surprised that the last owners had blocked it up. The bricks inside were all scorched black, and covered in…

"What are those?" he asked.

Someone had carved symbols into the bricks. Rings, circles, spirals – dozens of them, clustered together in the dark like watching eyes. Mum caught sight of Yanni's face, and squeezed him into a hug.

"We'll sand those off tomorrow. Want to see your new bedroom?"

Yanni glowed. Usually he would have squirmed away from a hug – he was nearly twelve, and felt too old for stuff like that now. But he didn't get many times like this any more – him and Mum, just the two of them. He couldn't explain how much he missed them: simple, thoughtless kisses as she walked past, or being bear-hugged from behind. There were some people who could always say how they were feeling, whether they were angry or lonely or sad, but Yanni wasn't one of them.

They went upstairs and found his new bedroom. Yanni's heart sank: it was the worst one of all. The rest of the house had been stripped and painted, but this room had been forgotten. Stained curtains still hung at the window. There was a moth-eaten carpet on the floor, with faded shapes where furniture had stood.

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Mum cried. "They were supposed to do this room, too…"

In the centre of the room was an old wooden bed frame, stood like a waiting guest. Yanni gulped. "I'm not going to have to sleep in that, am I?"

"Absolutely not," said Mum. "It could be infested."

"Infested?"

"Bedbugs." She shuddered. "They hide in the cracks."

Yanni recoiled. The bed frame was riddled from top to bottom with hairline fractures. There could be *things* living inside them, waiting to scuttle out and bite him

while he slept. The thought made him want to jump in a hot shower and never stop washing.

There was a scream from downstairs – Ari had arrived.

Mum sighed. "I'm sorry, darling. We'll see if the movers can help fix it. Can you take down those old curtains while I feed Ari?"

She left, and that was their moment together gone. Yanni pushed down the words bubbling up inside him. That was all he got now: half a hug, and the worst room in the house.

He gazed out of the window: a single sheet of glass, ringed with mildew. His old bedroom had looked out over his neighbours' back gardens; this one looked out over the bare blank fields of Fallow Hall. Yanni's heart sank even further. He had never seen anywhere so cold, so bleak, so unwelcoming in all his life. There was nothing for him out here, *nothing…*

He stopped. He was wrong: the fields weren't completely empty. In the far distance, the grass suddenly bulged into a mound. It was too small to be a hill, too big to be nothing; but the moment Yanni saw it, he felt the shrivel of skin against his bones.

He knew, deep in his gut, that there was something wrong with it. It was like a monster crouched beneath the earth: a boil in the grass. Yanni could swear that his ears even started ringing when he looked at it – like

high-pitched bells, echoing in a distant empty room.

Don't ever go near that thing, whispered a voice at the back of his head. *It's bad.*

Yanni shook himself, and quickly turned away from the window. Of course the mound was bad: everything in Fallow Hall was bad. He was stuck in a horrible house with a horrible baby and a horrible family that didn't even care about him.

How could things possibly get any worse?



The Gift

Yanni woke up early the next morning. He didn't have a choice – without the tatty curtains the room was flooded with daylight.

His bedroom – if you could call it that – looked even worse than it had the day before. The movers had taken the old bed and carpet, so now it was just bare, splintered floorboards covered in cardboard boxes. Yanni had begun unpacking them yesterday, but after he started he realized he had nowhere to put anything.

He got up, trying to work out which box had his clothes in it. After a while, he lost patience and started emptying boxes onto the floor. It was only when he'd found a top and trousers that he noticed the framed photo lying beside them.

It was a family portrait, taken last year. Mum and Dad sat in the centre with newborn Ari between them, glowing with shell-shocked happiness. Yanni stood to

one side, his hair gelled and combed, scowling in a suit jacket that was far too big. He looked like an undertaker. Behind him were two other adults, also dressed in smart clothes. They stood with their arms circling the family, gazing proudly at the camera as if to say: *Yes, that's right; they're all ours.*

Yiayia and Pappou.

Yanni felt a tug on his heart. Normally his family went to visit his grandparents every summer – but this year, the annual trip to Greece had been cancelled because of the problems with the house move. It was the first summer in Yanni's life that he hadn't spent lounging in a sunlit courtyard, being dragged into the kitchen ten times a day so Yiayia could squeeze his cheek and stuff him full of dripping *loukoumades* or great wobbling slices of *galatopita*. Or being summoned to Pappou's study, rich with the scent of coffee and cigarettes, so he could tell Yanni family stories and secretly give him crisp banknotes and promise that he'd get even more next time if he was a good boy and learned to speak Greek. Yanni had missed it all so much. The late warm outdoor dinners that stretched long into the night, where he could stay up as late as he wanted, lost in a haze of chatter and food in the afterglow of a summer's day…

It all felt so far away now. Whenever Yanni did see his grandparents again, he knew it wouldn't be the

same. He was no longer the precious only grandchild of the family; he was another man of the house. When he spoke to Yiayia and Pappou on the phone, on name days and at Easter, they just asked if he was being a good brother and then Pappou would tell him off for not speaking more Greek. Yanni felt like he had crossed over a threshold into a place where summer was gone and hugs didn't exist any more, and there was no way of ever turning back. It had all changed so fast…

That was when he saw it: a shimmer of blue glass, buried in the clothes on the floor.

It was a necklace on a leather thread. A blue stone that had a white circle in the middle, and then a pale blue circle with a dark blue dot inside that. Yanni recognized it at once: it had been a gift from Yiayia on their last trip to Greece, when Mum was still pregnant with Ari. Yiayia was always buying him little presents.

"This is for you," she had said, holding up the necklace. "A *mati*. You like, yes?"

Yanni wasn't sure if he did like it – the blue stones were everywhere in tourist shops, on keyrings and wall hangings and jewellery, but they'd always creeped him out a bit. They looked too much like eyes.

Yiayia tied it carefully around his neck.

"I remember when you were a baby, *mátia mou* – so beautiful, but so sick! Many nights you were in the

hospital. Pappou and me, we pray night and day for you to be safe."

She placed her hand on the stone that now hung at his chest, just above his heart.

"Is always to protect you. And when your sister is here, you protect her, yes?" She cupped his face, and her hands were as soft as tissue paper. "Good luck for nice boy."

Yanni had promised that he would, and then he had put the necklace in a drawer when he had come home and forgotten about it. And now, here it was in this horrible place: the very last thing Yiayia had given him, back when he was her precious only grandchild. It even smelled like her perfume.

Yanni glanced up to make sure he was alone. Then he quickly kissed the necklace, hung it around his neck so no one could see it, and left his bedroom.

Mum and Dad had been busy: the hallway was lined with framed family photos. Yanni found Dad downstairs on his knees in the living room, silently sanding the carvings off the back wall of the fireplace. He was so tired he didn't even look up when Yanni walked by. Ari was suspended from the kitchen door frame in her bouncer, wailing forlornly while Mum unpacked boxes with grim determination.

"She was up all night," said Mum, her voice frazzled. "Can you take her for a bit, Yanni? I think she wants you."

Mum was right: the moment Ari saw him, she held out her arms and whined. Yanni sighed. Ari *always* wanted him – it was the only thing that stopped her crying sometimes. Everyone told him how lucky he was to have a sister who loved him so much, but Yanni didn't feel lucky. It just meant he got his hair pulled and his face drooled on or savaged by her one and only razor-sharp tooth. He lifted her out of the bouncer and, sure enough, she dug it straight into his nose.

"Ow!" he muttered. "Stop, that hurts – wait, why are you squirming?"

Yanni knew why – she didn't want to be held; she wanted to stand up, even though she'd just made him pick her up. He tried to put her back in the bouncer but she cried, so he let her stand on the floor instead while he held her hands; but she still kept crying – she wanted to stand up by herself, even though she didn't know how to yet.

"Yanni, can you not get her so worked up, please?" Mum sighed.

He kept trying to hold her, but Ari wouldn't take no for an answer. Eventually he decided to let her try standing by herself; but the moment he let go of her hands, she keeled over sideways and hit the floor. Her scream filled the room like a flare.

Mum snapped round. "Yanni! What did I just say?"

Yanni burned with the injustice of it all. "It's not my fault! She wouldn't let me hold her!"

But Mum wasn't listening. She picked up Ari and made comforting sounds to soothe her. Yanni watched as his sister burrowed greedily into his mother's shoulder and felt his insides blacken like burning paper. It seemed like all he did was disappoint people nowadays.

Dad walked into the kitchen, dusting off his hands. "Right! That's the fireplace done – next stop, Ari's bedroom!"

Mum slumped against the kitchen counter, cradling Ari listlessly. "What about tonight? Did you get everything sorted?"

Dad looked blank. "What's tonight?"

Mum stared at him. The room went still. When she next spoke, her voice was very calm and very level, like a tray of glasses balanced on the tip of a pin.

"The thing I mentioned yesterday," she said. "And last week. And the week before that. The thing that you promised – *promised* – you wouldn't forget."

Dad slapped his head.

"Oh, *that*! Ha ha ha. Of course I haven't forgotten!" He dragged Yanni out of the kitchen. "Yiannaki, come and help me with these boxes!"

Yiannaki was Dad's pet name for him – he always used it when he wanted something. Yanni waited until

Dad closed the kitchen door before he spoke.

"What's Mum talking about? What's happening tonight?"

"No idea," said Dad nervously. "I was going to ask you. I think she's confused – it's not like me to forget something important."

This was the biggest lie in the history of the world. Dad forgot everything – and it'd become even worse now that Ari kept him awake half the night. He hastily scrolled through his phone calendar and his eyes lit up.

"Ah – of course! All Hallows' Eve!"

Yanni frowned. "What's All Hallows' Eve?"

"Halloween, you muppet! Didn't they teach you anything at that school?"

Yanni felt a little needle of sadness. *Halloween.* His friends back home would be having a party tonight, like they always did. They'd told him that they weren't, but Yanni knew they were only saying that so they didn't hurt his feelings.

"That must be it," said Dad, sighing with relief. "Your mum wants to make a good impression on the village. We can't let trick-or-treaters leave empty-handed on our first Halloween here, can we?" He reached into his pocket and handed Yanni some coins. "Here – pop to the village shop and get some sweets. And a pumpkin – and some decorations, too. We'll have a proper Halloween party to

celebrate the move! Maybe after Ari's gone to bed, you and I can stay up late and watch a scary film together. How about it?"

Yanni felt a flicker inside him. He couldn't remember the last time they'd had a film night. Part of him felt stupid for being so excited about hanging out with his parents, but another part of him wanted it more than anything in the whole entire world.

"Yeah, sure, maybe."

"*Maybe!* Such a poser. I can see right…" He looked down, and stopped. "Hey – your *mati*!"

Yanni blushed. Ari had drooled on his T-shirt, so the glass eye was visible through the damp cotton. Dad beamed.

"Yiayia would love that you're wearing it, you know. It's supposed to protect you from the evil eye."

He crossed himself, just like Yiayia did in church.

"She's so superstitious! You had to keep out of her way on Halloween when I was a kid – she spent the whole day spitting on the floor to scare off the Devil. *F'tou!*"

He mimed spitting on the floor. Yanni snorted, despite himself. It was nice, joking around with Dad like this – that didn't happen very often now. Before he could enjoy it too much, Dad shooed him out of the front door.

"Quick! It's supposed to rain later. You can take in the sights of Fallow Hall on the way!"

"What sights?" muttered Yanni sarcastically.

"Enough of that," Dad shot back. "There's loads of things to see. The village square, and the church – they've even got a dolmen!"

Yanni blinked – all at once, he felt like he could see the strange grass mound right in front of him, and hear the ringing in the back of his head. Without meaning to, he found himself reaching up and holding the necklace for comfort.

"Wh-what's a dolmen?" he asked nervously, dreading the answer.

Dad just smiled – and when he spoke, the voice that came out was a spot-on impression of Yiayia.

"See for yourself, *mátia mou*."