The Twig Man

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A WARNING

I hate where I live, and I hate the fact that it has a reputation. Our house is just off the motorway. They call it the vanishing motorway because, well, people vanish along its route. You see, I live in Hanging Hill. That probably means nothing to you, which is why I HAVE to warn you. *Everyone* in Hanging Hill knows what happened that autumn, even if they don't say it out loud.

Anyway, Dad is always going on about the importance of being fair and honest, so it's only fair that I am HONEST with you. About what happened that is, in case you ever find yourself on the wrong side of the motorway. I'd stay far away, but if for some crazy reason you do come to Hanging Hill, don't go into the woods without reading this first.

JUST DON'T!

That's where he lived.

The Twig Man.

I guess you'd better read about it. You can thank me at the end.

CHAPTER ONE

THE WOODS

Everyone has an unlucky day and today is going to be mine. I feel it as soon as I open my eyes and hobble over to the window in my bedroom. My stomach is tight and twisty, and my mouth is dry. The window is covered in thick, black ice. I swing it open, hoping to see inches of heavy snow across the front porch and the woods just beyond that, but only a thin jacket of frost is visible.

I head downstairs and reach for the chocolate covered flakes, eating as quickly as I can before Dad comes into the kitchen. He'll only go on about asking my 'friends' over for the half-term. I would ask them *if* I had any. Turns out making friends isn't as easy as my sister made it look. Dad never noticed much when Lana was here, but he's been desperate to fill the house with noise ever since.

I put on my big, puffer jacket, and muddy wellies, and open the front door. It's my favourite place to be—outside that is. It doesn't matter where, as long as I'm not surrounded by four walls. When Lana left a year ago, the house was filled with people. At one point, we had to set up chairs and tables in the garden because there were so many of them.

They sat here, trying to soothe Mum with words like 'teenagers act out, it's what they do,' and 'she'll be back before you know it'.

Mum didn't say much, unless you count crying as saying something (which I do, because it's pretty much a language of its own).

I tried telling her the police were wrong. I mean, sure, they *did*

find all that stuff on Lana's laptop about travelling to Europe. Then there was the receipt for the plane ticket she'd bought with mum's credit card. The rows had been getting worse too.

"You can go wherever you like, after you finish your studies!" Mum would shout.

"It's so unfair! I don't want to go to university!" Lana would yell back.

I guess if you're into evidence and all that, you'd believe the police too, that Lana *chose* to leave. The thing is, I know my sister better than anyone, and I know she would NEVER leave me behind. She promised to take me to the comic book convention in London only a day before she disappeared. We even picked our outfits. I was going as Venom and she was going as Black Widow. Lana only bought that plane ticket to make Mum mad, that's all.

I blame the woods—they're cursed. Don't take my word for it. It's all anyone can talk about at school. Well, that and the tree monster that lives there. We call him the Twig Man. Legend says if you wander too far into the woods, he'll snatch you with his roots and drag you into his lair. Sometimes, I think that's what happened to Lana because she'd often wander into the woods to take pictures of animals. My sister loves animals, even dangerous ones.

Mum and Dad call the stories about the Twig Man and the missing children 'nonsense drivel', and I'm not surprised. That's what happens when you get old, your brain stops producing imagination. It's why I'm going to invent a device that can bottle up imagination so that when I am ancient like my parents, I can drink some every day. Anyway, Dad reckons Lana got in with a bad crowd, but I would have known if she did. We were always together, and we shared lots of secrets, no matter how silly or small.

The chilly air crawls under my clothes as soon as I step out of

the house. I pick up the ball next to the front door and kick it against the side of the shed. The wobbly feeling in my stomach hasn't gone away, and now it's travelling up into my throat and making me feel a little sick. I stop kicking the ball every few minutes and turn to look behind me, skin tingling, and senses on high alert, but there's nothing there.

I count how many kick-ups I can do—my personal best is forty-five—but when I get to thirteen, I lose my balance, and the ball rolls behind me toward the woods. I hesitate for a second. I'm not supposed to go anywhere near the woods, and not because Mum and Dad believe in the stories. Since Lana left, everything is out of bounds.

Will you, or won't you?

That was one of Lana's and my favourite games. She never said no to a dare, that's what made hanging out with her so much fun.

"Ari, if you get hungry later there's still shifta in the fridge," Dad yells from the kitchen window.

He always announces lunch like it's a grand event. Mum used to love cooking, but she does all her cooking at work now. She runs a small café called Azadi; apparently, it's all the rave in Hanging Hill. I don't see why, it's the same Kurdish food Mum cooks at home.

"Ari!" Dad comes up behind me.

"I heard you, Dad!"

"Why didn't you answer me? Is everything okay?" Dad asks, frowning at me.

"Everything's fine," I mumble.

"You know I worry."

Over-worry more like, I think to myself.

"You haven't been wandering about all alone, have you?" He glances over my shoulder at the woods.

I roll my eyes. Since Lana's disappearance there is a long list of

things I can't do, like go to the shops or walk to school by myself, even though I'm nearly twelve. Mum and Dad weren't always like this. I was allowed to do lots of things by myself before Lana vanished.

"We spoke about this." Dad runs a hand through his hair, but it flops back over his eyes. He hasn't bothered getting a trim in weeks and his beard has grown shabby. I notice the white strands mixed in with bits of brown. The older girls at school think he looks like the famous actor who plays Thor in the Marvel movies. If you ask me, Dad looks like Dad, and I *know* for a fact he isn't Thor, because if he had superhuman powers he would summon Lana back and make everything okay again.

"I haven't been anywhere," I tell him, and Dad smiles.

"Okay good. I need to run some errands in the high street. I should be back in about an hour. Why don't you take a walk with your mum?"

"Right." I nod.

"I mean it, Ari, it's not healthy to be spending so much time alone."

I stare at him.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to bring up . . ."

His long face breaks into a cheery smile, he leans over and gives me a quick hug before getting into his car.

I watch him drive off the gravel and disappear round the corner. Dad works for a factory that makes wooden furniture not far from here, which is why my parents decided it was a good idea to buy a house right at the mouth of the woods.

I head inside.

"Mum? Do you want to go for a walk? The ice has melted."

"Maybe later. I'm exhausted, it's been such a tough week at work." She looks up at me with a wide smile. Her long hair is wrapped up beneath a silky rainbow-coloured scarf. Lana takes after Mum. They both have plump, rosy cheeks, and

almond-shaped eyes. Mum's eyes used to glitter whenever she spoke, but since Lana's been gone, they've sunken into her face and the creases around her eyes have multiplied.

"We don't have to walk far, and I can make hot cocoa to take with us."

Mum plays with the loose curls of her hair. Raven black, just like Lana's.

"You're right, we should get some fresh air. I just have a few phone calls to make first." She grabs the phone. Her fingers hover over the keypad hesitantly.

I watch her eyes scan the screen.

"It's not your fault," I tell her.

Mum looks at me in surprise, like I've poked into her brain without asking for permission.

"Lana didn't leave because of you."

She gives me a sad smile. "Thanks for trying to make me feel better, but we both know that isn't true."

I open my mouth to protest, but Mum interrupts.

"Right, I'll go put on something warm, then we'll head off. Don't wander off!" she yells from over her shoulder and hurries to her room before I can say anything else.

Outside, the patchy sky is barely visible because of the dense white mist; its arms stretch high and low, restless, and unsure of where it wants to go for the day. The birds flap their wings in silent swoops. There is no chirping or twittering, nothing you would expect to hear at this time of day. My breath wakes up the sleepy woods as I float through the gathering clouds searching for the ball. I could have sworn it was here somewhere.

I squint, making my way deeper inside the labyrinth of towering trees, swallowed whole by the gloominess of it. Moving shapes circle overhead, but every time I look up, there's nothing in the sky.

It's just swaying leaves, I tell myself.

Then, just as I get used to the silence, a loud crunch rings through the air. I swallow my spit and hold in my panicked breath, trying hard not to think about the stories of the Twig Man.

It's only a myth, I mutter under my breath, but I must not really believe that because my heart starts pounding in my chest, and I can practically hear it thumping in my ears. Someone, or something else is here.