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PROLOGUE

A Fairy Tale, Seven Years Ago

Strangers never walk down this road, the sisters thought in unison as the man trudged towards them. *Certainly* not strangers in business suits – there was just no reason for them to be out here in the middle of nowhere. Yet here one was, clouds of dirt rising around his feet with each step before settling into the cuffs of his impeccably pressed slacks. The older sister raised an eyebrow and stepped up to the white fence, while the younger sister finished a cherry Popsicle already half melted from the afternoon sun.

The man nodded his head in greeting as he finally came to a stop in front of them. 'Hello, little ones,' he said, voice smooth. The sunlight glinted off the man's slick blond hair

and created thin shadows on his face where wrinkles were just beginning to form.

'I'm *eleven*,' the older sister answered boldly, lifting her chin high.

'My mistake! *Young ladies*,' the man corrected with a chuckle.

The older sister twirled in response, pretending not to study him as her party dress bloomed like a red mushroom around her. As the man watched her, his smile faded. His eyes grew darker, his smile more forced, and he licked his lips in a way that made the older sister's stomach tighten. She stopped midturn and grabbed her sister's sticky hand, snatching away the Popsicle stick and gripping it tightly, like a weapon.

'Is your mother home?' the man asked, the pleasant expression sweeping over his face once again.

'Our mother doesn't live here,' the little sister declared, kicking at a dandelion. 'You have weird eyes,' she added, squinting in the sun to look at the stranger's face. His irises were dark sienna, the red-brown shade of autumn leaves.

'Shh, Rosie!' the older sister scolded, backing away.

'Ah, it's all right,' the man said, stepping forward. 'The better to see your lovely faces with, my dears. Your father is home, then? Brother?'

The older sister shook her head, black curls scattering over her shoulders. 'Our grandmother is here, though.'

'Would you fetch her for me?'

The older sister hesitated, sizing him up again. She

finally gave a curt nod and turned towards the little cottage behind her. 'Oma March! There's a man here!'

No answer. '*Oma March!*' she yelled louder.

The door swung open, slamming into the rows of gerbera daisies planted just outside the cottage. Oma March stepped outside, her daisy-patterned apron dusted with flour from the cake she was making for a neighbouring boy's birthday party. Sounds from the television drifted though the yard, *The Price Is Right* theme intrusive against the songs of sparrows in nearby trees.

'Scarlett, love, what's wrong?' she asked calmly, never one to be easily riled.

Scarlett yanked Rosie towards the house. 'There's a man – a *stranger* – here,' she said, a note of warning in her voice as she brushed past her grandmother in the doorway. Rosie plopped down in front of the tiny television in the kitchen, but Scarlett lingered behind Oma March's broad back, fingers still gripping the red Popsicle stick.

'Oh,' Oma March said as she regarded the stranger in surprise and tugged her apron off to reveal blue jeans underneath.

'Good afternoon, ma'am. I'm here as a representative of Hanau Citrus Grove. We're trying to expand our business by selling citrus fruits door to door. Pay on delivery in three to six weeks. May I show you our catalogue?'

'Citrus? You mean like oranges?' Oma March asked in her German accent. She waved the man forward;

he unlocked the white gate and strode towards her, hand outstretched.

'Yes, ma'am. Oranges, grapefruits, tangerines—' The man clasped Oma March's palm in his, the sleeve of his navy suit jacket sliding back to reveal a curious black mark on his wrist.

Scarlett narrowed her green eyes to get a better look. It was an arrow that didn't look so much like the tattoos the woodsman down the road had, but rather as though it was a true part of his skin.

Oma March followed Scarlett's gaze, and suddenly her mouth became a firm line. The air stilled. The salesman's sparkling eyes clouded with the same eerie expression they'd held when he'd regarded Scarlett outside.

'We don't need any. Thank you, sir,' Oma March said, her voice hard.

No one moved at first, and it reminded Scarlett of the way dogs stand perfectly still before lunging in to fight. The salesman licked his lips again and stared at Oma March for a long moment before a slow, creeping smile pulled at the corners of his mouth.

'You're sure?' he said as Oma March shut the door.

As soon as the latch clicked, she wheeled around to face them, face blanched and eyes pale green disks. Scarlett backed up, afraid to see her grandmother wear such a foreign expression. The Popsicle stick clattered to the ground.

'*Versteckt euch!*' Oma March whispered hoarsely,

pointing urgently towards her bedroom in the back of the cottage. *Hide*. *Hide* now.

Rosie abandoned the television, grabbing her sister's hand nervously. Scarlett opened her mouth to ask Oma March to explain, but before she could find the words, a guttural, ragged howl erupted on the other side of the front door. Scarlett's blood ran cold.

Oma March slammed a wooden beam across the door, then swung one of the bright yellow kitchen chairs over their heads and propped it up at an angle against the doorknob just before the knob began to turn furiously.

'*Schatzi*, my treasures, I won't let him have you!' Oma March murmured under her breath, like a prayer. She dashed for the telephone and began dialling.

'Charlie? Charlie, one is here. Outside,' Oma March whispered frantically to Pa Reynolds, the woodsman who lived down the road. 'Oh, God, Charlie, hurry,' she pleaded. She slammed the receiver of the avocado-coloured phone back down and threw her weight behind the couch to slide it in front of the door as well.

Another low, growling howl, followed by frantic scratching at the door.

Oma March snapped her head towards her granddaughters, eyes watery and pleading. 'Scarlett! Don't worry about me. Take Rosie and *hide*,' she begged.

Scarlett nodded and squeezed Rosie's hand, yanking her into Oma March's room and slamming the door behind them. A tangle of legs and arms, they scrambled into the

corner between the bed and bookshelf, breathing in the cool scent of laundry detergent and musky old philosophy books. They heard scraping from the other room as Oma March struggled with the couch. Another low, growling howl, then a sharp bang and a rainlike sound as splinters from the door poured down on to the floor.

Oma March shouted frantically in German, but her voice was cut off by loud thuds of furniture crashing to the ground, upholstery ripping, pans clattering. Scarlett bit her bottom lip so hard it began to bleed.

And then silence: eerie, thick silence that poured over the little cottage and drowned out the yammering of *The Price Is Right* contestants.

The sisters clung to each other, near-mirror images with their chests pressed together until it seemed as if their hearts were one single organ beating between them. Rosie tangled her tiny fingers into Scarlett's thick black hair and hid her face by her sister's neck. Scarlett stroked Rosie's head comfortingly with one hand, while the other groped under the bed for something – anything – that she could use to defend them. Something more than a Popsicle stick. Scarlett shuddered when a shadow appeared in the line of light under the door. Finally, her fingers found the smooth handle of a handheld mirror beneath the bed.

The shadow began to pace back and forth on the other side of the door, every few steps punctuated by a breathy growl and the scraping of talonlike nails on the hardwood

floor. Scarlett watched, hypnotized, and when the pacing suddenly stopped, she gasped. The shadow pressed against the wooden door so hard that it looked as though the door may splinter under the weight. Rosie cried out, and Scarlett struck the mirror hard against the nightstand, cracking the glass. Trembling, Scarlett prised the largest shard from the mirror's frame.

The aluminium knob turned so slowly that for a moment Scarlett thought perhaps it was just Oma March coming to check on them like she often did just before she turned in for the night. Scarlett squeezed her eyes shut. *Just Oma March. I am not here, Rosie is not here, we are in bed*. But as the door opened a crack, Scarlett forced her eyes wide, gritting her teeth when she saw Rosie's chubby cheeks still shaking in fear. The door opened a little farther, a little farther, the stream of light hunting them down in the darkness. The single heart between them pounded as the door finally swung fully open and they were exposed to the light, helpless to hide from the form silhouetted in the door frame.

It was *him*, the salesman, but it was also . . . not. He still had shiny blond hair, but now it was speckled across his body like patches of disease. His eyes were enormous and hollow, his mouth twisted and stretched as if his face had been pulled apart at the corners, revealing rows of long, pointed fangs. His back arched as if it was broken, hunching his shoulders and turning his feet in. And his feet . . . the horrible claws were as long as fishing hooks

and left deep gashes in the floorboards as he inched closer to the girls.

He ducked to fit under the door frame and, in one fluid transformation, lost the last few characteristics that had made him look even remotely like the blue-suited salesman – that had made him look remotely *human*. His nose became long and canine, his lips spread even farther. He lurched forward and planted his two hands – no, *paws* – on to the ground, thick, greasy hair clinging to his entire body. And the *smell*. A rotting, corpselike stench emanated from the thing – the *wolf* – making the sisters wretch. He watched them hungrily, evil adoration in his eyes.

Scarlett swallowed hard, gripping the mirror shard so tightly that it cut her hand. She pushed away the impending tears, the energy in her legs screaming for her to run, and the sound of the presenter on *The Price is Right* shouting about dinette sets as if nothing were wrong, as if she couldn't see her grandmother's form slumped on the ground just behind the monster.

She stared into the monster's hard sienna eyes and it cocked its mangy head. Before Scarlet knew what she was doing, she shoved Rosie under the bed and leapt to her feet, wielding the broken piece of mirror like a knife. Scarlett took a step forward, then another, until she was so close to the monster that the rotting stench coming from his throat choked her. The wolf opened his wide, long jaws, rows of teeth and bloodstained tongue stretching for

her. A thought locked itself in Scarlett's mind, and she repeated it over and over until it became a chant, a prayer: *I am the only one left to fight, so now I must kill you.*