



A MAP OF DAYS

THE FOURTH NOVEL OF

MISS PEREGRINE'S

PECULIAR CHILDREN



THE #1
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RANSOM RIGGS



— A MAP of DAYS —
THE FOURTH NOVEL OF
MISS PEREGRINE'S
— PECULIAR CHILDREN —

BY RANSOM RIGGS

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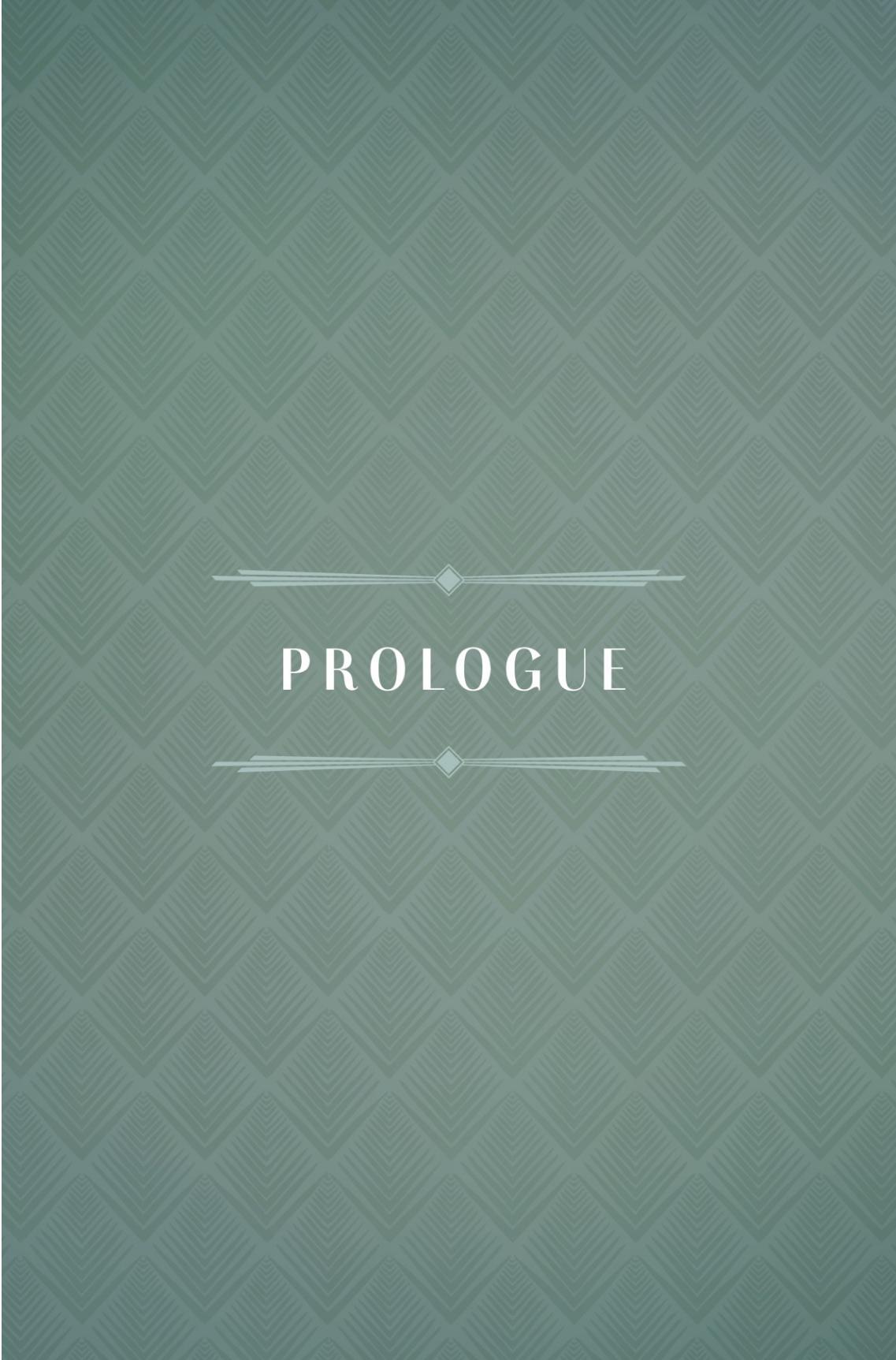
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PROLOGUE

Never have I doubted my soundness of mind as often as I did on that first night, when the bird-woman and her wards came to save me from the madhouse. That's where I was going, pinned between beefy uncles in the back seat of my parents' car, when a wall of peculiar children seemed to leap directly from my imagination into the driveway before us, aglow in our high beams like a formation of angels.

We skidded to a stop. A wave of dust erased everything beyond our windshield. Had I conjured their echo, some flickering hologram projected from deep within my brain? Anything seemed more believable than my friends being here, now. Peculiars had a way of making anything seem possible, but a visit from them was one of the few impossibilities of which I could still be certain.

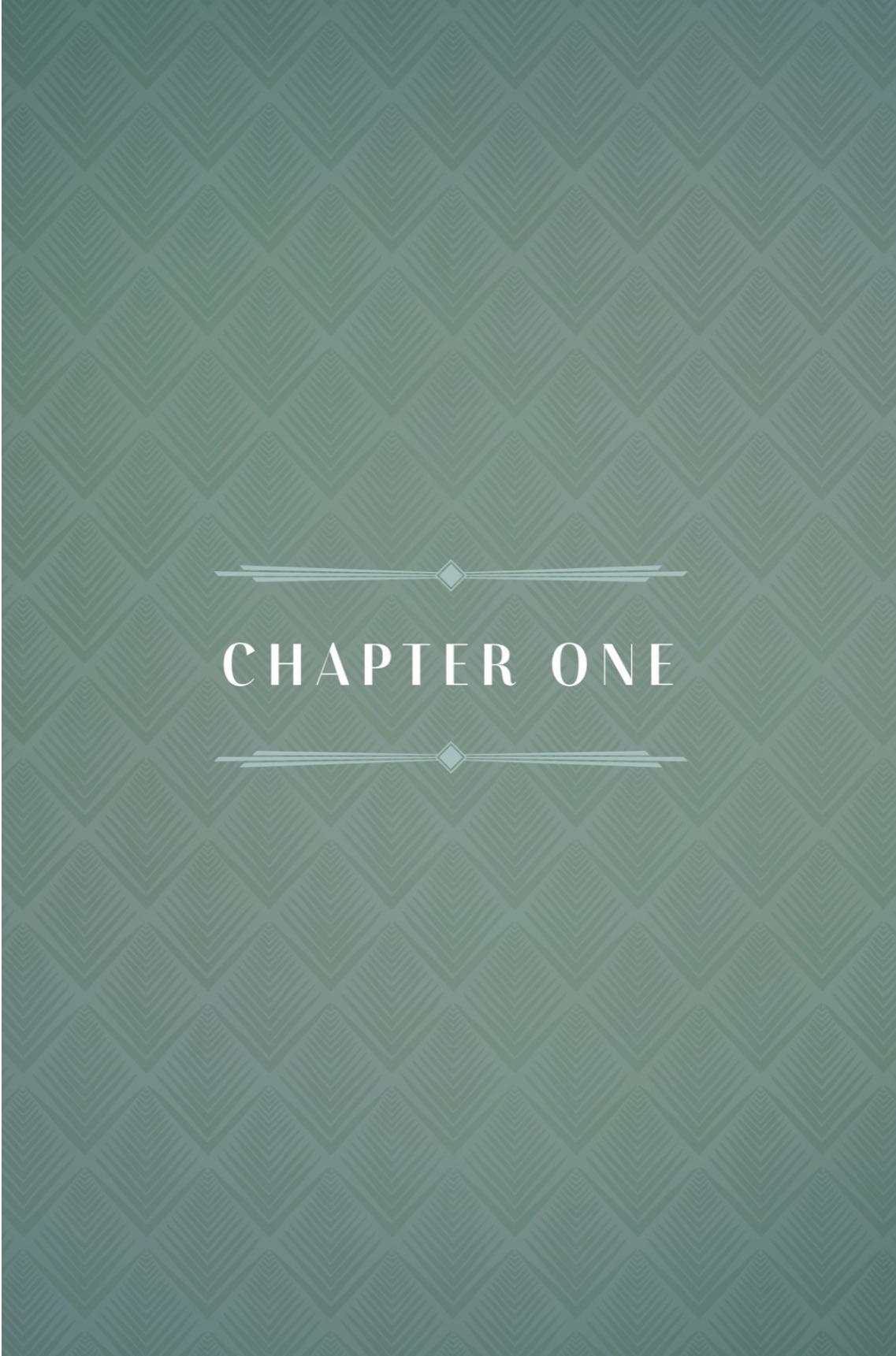
It had been my choice to leave Devil's Acre. To go home again, where my friends couldn't follow. I had hoped that in returning I might sew together the disparate threads of my life: the normal and the peculiar, the ordinary and the extraordinary.

Another impossibility. My grandfather had tried to sew his lives together too and failed, estranged in the end from both his peculiar family and his normal one. In refusing to choose one kind of life over the other, he had doomed himself to lose both—just as I was about to.

I looked up to see a figure moving toward us through the clearing dust.

"Who the hell are you?" my dad said.

"Alma LeFay Peregrine," she replied, "Ymbryne Council leader pro tem and headmistress to these peculiar children. We've met before, though I don't expect you'd remember. Children, say hello."



CHAPTER ONE

It's strange, what the mind can digest and what it resists. I had just survived the most surreal summer imaginable—skipping back to bygone centuries, taming invisible monsters, falling in love with my grandfather's time-arrested ex-girlfriend—but only now, in the unexceptional present, in suburban Florida, in the house I'd grown up in, was I finding it hard to believe my eyes.

Here was Enoch, splayed upon our beige sectional, sipping Coke from my dad's Tampa Bay Buccaneers tumbler; here was Olive, unstrapping her lead shoes to float ceilingward and ride circles on our fan; here were Horace and Hugh in our kitchen, Horace studying the photos on the fridge door while Hugh rustled for a snack; here was Claire, both mouths slack as she gazed at the great black monolith of our wall-mounted television; here was Millard, my mother's decor magazines rising from the coffee table and splitting in midair as he skimmed them, the shape of his bare feet imprinted into our carpet. It was a mingling of worlds I'd imagined a thousand times but never dreamed possible. But here it was: my Before and After, colliding with the force of planets.

Millard had already tried to explain to me how it was possible they could be here, apparently safe and unafraid. The loop collapse that had nearly killed us all in Devil's Acre had reset their internal clocks. He didn't quite understand why, only that they were no longer in danger of sudden catastrophic aging if they stayed too long in the present. They would get older one day at a time, just like I did, their debt of years seemingly forgiven, as if they hadn't spent most of the twentieth century reliving the same sunny day. It was undoubtedly a miracle—a breakthrough unprecedented in peculiar history—and yet how it had come to be was not half as amazing to me as the fact that they were here at all: that beside me stood Emma, lovely, strong Emma, her hand entwined with mine, her green eyes shining as they scanned the room in wonder. Emma, whom I'd so often dreamed about in the long, lonely weeks since my return home. She wore a sensible gray dress that fell below the knee, hard flat shoes she could run in if she had to, her sandy hair pulled back into a ponytail. Decades of being depended on had made her practical to the core, but neither the responsibility nor the weight of years she carried had managed to snuff the girlish spark that lit her so brightly from the inside. She was both hard and soft, sour and sweet, old and young. That she could contain so much was what I loved most about her. Her soul was bottomless.

“Jacob?”

She was talking to me. I tried to reply, but my head was mired in dreamy quicksand.

She waved at me, then snapped her fingers, her thumb sparking like struck flint. I startled and came back to myself.

“Hey,” I said. “Sorry.”

“Where’d you go?”

"I'm just—" I waved as if raking cobwebs from the air. "It's good to see you, that's all." Completing a sentence felt like trying to gather a dozen balloons in my arms.

Her smile couldn't mask a look of mild concern. "I know it must be awfully strange for you, all of us dropping in like this. I hope we didn't shock you too badly."

"No, no. Well, maybe a little." I nodded at the room and everyone in it. Happy chaos accompanied our friends wherever they went. "You sure I'm not dreaming?"

"Are you sure *I'm* not?" She took my other hand and squeezed it, and her warmth and solidness seemed to lend the world some weight. "I can't tell you how many times, over the years, I've pictured myself visiting this little town."

For a moment I was confused, but then . . . of course. My grandfather. Abe had lived here since before my dad was born; I'd seen his Florida address on letters Emma had kept. Her gaze drifted as if she were lost in a memory, and I felt an unwelcome twinge of jealousy—then was embarrassed for it. She was entitled to her past, and had every right to feel as unmoored by the collision of our worlds as I did.

Miss Peregrine blew in like a tornado. She had taken off her traveling coat to reveal a striking jacket of green tweed and riding pants, as if she'd just arrived on horseback. She crossed the room tossing out orders. "Olive, come down from there! Enoch, remove your feet from the sofa!" She hooked a finger at me and nodded toward the kitchen. "Mr. Portman, there are matters which require your attention."

Emma took my arm and accompanied me, for which I was grateful; the room had not quite stopped spinning.

"Off to snog each other already?" said Enoch. "We only just arrived!"

Emma's free hand darted out to singe the top of his hair. Enoch recoiled and slapped at his smoking head, and the laugh that burst out of me seemed to clear some of the cobwebs from my head.

Yes, my friends were real and they were here. Not only that, Miss Peregrine had said they were going to stay awhile. Learn about the modern world a bit. Have a holiday, a well-earned respite from the squalor of Devil's Acre—which, with their proud old house on Cairnholm gone, had become their temporary home. Of course they were welcome, and I was inexpressibly grateful to have them here. But how would this work, exactly? What about my parents and uncles, who at this very moment Bronwyn was guarding in the garage? It was too much to grapple with all at once, so for the moment I shoved it aside.

Miss Peregrine was talking to Hugh by the open fridge. They looked jarringly out of place amid the stainless steel and hard edges of my parents' modern kitchen, like actors who had wandered onto the wrong movie set. Hugh was waving a package of plastic-wrapped string cheese.

"But there's only strange food here, and I haven't eaten for centuries!"

"Don't exaggerate, Hugh."

"I'm not. It's 1886 in Devil's Acre, and that's where we had breakfast."

Horace burst from our walk-in pantry. “I have completed my inventory and am frankly shocked. One sack of baking soda, one tin of sardines in salt, and one box of weevil-infested biscuit mix. Is the government rationing his food? Is there a war on?”

“We eat a lot of takeout,” I said, walking up beside him. “My parents don’t really cook.”

“Then why do they have this whomping great kitchen?” said Horace. “I may be an accomplished chef de cuisine, but I can’t make something from nothing.”

The truth was that my father had seen the kitchen in a design magazine and decided he had to have it. He tried to justify the cost by promising he would learn to cook and then throw legendary dinner parties for the family—but, like a lot of his plans, it fizzled after a few cooking lessons. So now they had this hugely expensive kitchen that was used mostly to cook frozen dinners and heat up day-old takeout. But rather than say any of that, I shrugged.

“Surely you won’t perish of hunger in the next five minutes,” Miss Peregrine said, and shooed both Horace and Hugh from the kitchen. “Now, then. You were looking a bit wobbly earlier, Mr. Portman. Are you feeling all right?”

“Better every minute,” I said, a bit embarrassed.

“You may be suffering from a touch of loop lag,” said Miss Peregrine. “Somewhat delayed in your case. It’s absolutely normal among time travelers, especially those who are new to it.” She was speaking to me over her shoulder as she moved through the kitchen, peeking inside each cabinet. “The symptoms are usually inconsequential, though not always. How long have you been feeling dizzy?”

“Only since you all got here. But really, I’m fine—”

“What about leaking ulcers, bunion clusters, or migraine headaches?”

“Nope.”

“Sudden mental derangement?”

“Uh . . . not that I can remember?”

“Untreated loop lag is no laughing matter, Mr. Portman. People have died. Hey—biscuits!” She grabbed a box of cookies from a cabinet, shook one into her hand, and popped it into her mouth. “Snails in your feces?” she asked, chewing.

I choked back a snicker. “No.”

“Spontaneous pregnancy?”

Emma recoiled. “You’re not serious!”

“It’s only happened once, that we know of,” said Miss Peregrine. She set the cookies down and fixed me with a stare. “The subject was male.”

“I’m not pregnant!” I said a little too loudly.

“And thank goodness for that!” someone shouted from the living room.

Miss Peregrine patted my shoulder. “It sounds as if you’re in the clear. Though I should have warned you.”

“It’s probably better you didn’t,” I said. It would have made me paranoid, not to mention that if I’d spent the last month sneaking pregnancy tests and checking my feces for snails, my parents would have long before banished me to an asylum.

“Fair enough,” said Miss Peregrine. “Now, before we can all relax and enjoy one another’s company, some business.” She began pacing a tight circle between the double ovens and the prep sink. “Item one: safety and security. I’ve scouted the perimeter of the house. All seems quiet, but appearances can be deceiving. Is there anything I should know about your neighbors?”

“Like what?”

“Criminal histories? Violent tendencies? Firearm collections?”

We had only two neighbors: ancient Mrs. Melloroos, a wheelchair-bound octogenarian who only left her house with the help of a live-in nurse, and a German couple who spent most of the year elsewhere, leaving their Cape Cod-style McMansion empty except during the winter.

“Mrs. Melloroos can be kind of nosy,” I said. “But as long as no one’s being flagrantly peculiar in her front yard, I don’t think she’ll give us any trouble.”

“Noted,” said Miss Peregrine. “Item two: Have you felt the presence of any hollowgast since you returned home?”

I felt my blood pressure spike at her mention of the word, which had crossed neither my mind nor my lips in several weeks. “No,” I said quickly. “Why? Have there been more attacks?”

“No more attacks. No sign of them whatsoever. But that’s what worries me. Now, about your family—”

“Didn’t we kill or capture them all in Devil’s Acre?” I said, not ready to change the subject away from hollowgast so quickly.

“Not quite *all*. A small cadre escaped with some wights after our victory, and we believe they absconded to America. And while I doubt they’ll come anywhere near *you*—I daresay they’ve learned their lesson—I can only assume they’re planning something. An abundance of caution couldn’t hurt.”

“They’re *terrified* of you, Jacob,” Emma said proudly.

“They are?” I said.

“After the thrashing you gave them, they’d be stupid not to be,” said Millard, his voice ringing out from the edge of the kitchen.

“Polite persons do not spy on private conversations,” Miss Peregrine huffed.

“I wasn’t spying, I was *hungry*. Also, I’ve been sent to ask you not to hog Jacob. We came an awfully long way to see him, you know.”

“They missed Jacob a lot,” Emma said to Miss Peregrine. “Nearly as much as I did.”

“Perhaps it’s time you addressed everyone,” Miss Peregrine said to me. “Make a welcome speech. Lay out some ground rules.”

“Ground rules?” I said. “Like what?”

“They’re my wards, Mr. Portman, but this is your town and your time. I’ll need your help keeping everyone out of trouble.”

“Just be sure to feed them,” said Emma.

I turned to Miss Peregrine. “What were you saying before, about my family?”

They couldn’t stay prisoners in the garage forever, and I was getting anxious about how we were going to deal with them.

"You needn't worry," Miss Peregrine said. "Bronwyn has the situation well in hand."

The words had hardly left her lips when a percussive, wall-rattling crash sounded from the direction of the garage. The vibrations sent glasses toppling from a nearby shelf to the floor, where they shattered.

"That sounds like a distinctly *out-of-hand* situation," said Millard.

We were already running.

• • •

"Stay where you are!" Miss Peregrine shouted toward the living room.

I dashed out of the kitchen and down the back hall, Emma just behind, adrenaline sharpening me. I wasn't sure what to expect when we burst into the garage. Smoke? Blood? It had sounded like an explosion, but I definitely did not anticipate finding my parents and uncles passed out in our car, peaceful as babes. The car's rear end was wedged into a major dent in the rolled-down garage door, and the concrete around it sparkled with bits of broken taillight. The engine was on and idling.

Bronwyn stood at the front end of the car with the bumper dangling from her hands. "Oh, I'm so sorry, I don't know what happened," she said, and dropped the bumper with an echoing *clang*.

Realizing I had to kill the engine before we all suffocated, I peeled away from the others and ran to the driver's-side door. The handle was locked. Of course it was: My family had been trying to keep Bronwyn out. I'm sure they'd been terrified.

"I can open it," Bronwyn said. "Stand back!"

She planted her feet and grabbed the door handle with both hands.

"What are you—" I started to say, and then with a mighty heave, she pulled the door open and straight off its hinges. Weight and momentum being what they were, the door kept going, flying out of her hands and across the room before burying itself in the back wall. The noise was like a physical force pushing me backward.

"Oh, fiddlywinks," Bronwyn said into the ringing silence that followed.

The garage was beginning to resemble some of the bombed houses I'd seen in wartime London.

"Bronwyn!" Emma shouted, uncovering her head. "You might have decapitated someone!"

I ducked into the hole where the driver's-side door had been, reached across my sleeping father, and snatched the keys from the ignition. My mother was slumped against my father, who was snoring. In the back, my uncles slept in each other's arms. Despite all the noise, none of them had stirred. I knew of only one substance that could put people into such a deep sleep: a powdered piece of Mother Dust. When I stood up out of the car again, I saw Bronwyn holding a little pouch of the stuff as she attempted to explain what had happened.

"The man in the back," she was saying, pointing at my uncle Bobby, "I seen him using his, his little—" She pulled Bobby's phone from her pocket.

"Cell phone," I said.

"Right—that," she continued. "So I took it away, which made all of them as mad as a bag of ferrets, and then I did like Miss P showed me—"

"You used the powder?" said Miss Peregrine.

"I blew it right at 'em, but they didn't fall asleep straight off. Jacob's dad started up the car, but instead of going forward, he—he—" Bronwyn gestured to the dented garage door, words failing her.

Miss Peregrine patted her on the arm. "Yes, dear, I can see. You handled things just right."

"Yeah," said Enoch. "Right through the *wall*."

We turned to see the other kids peeping at us from a tight cluster in the hallway.

"I told you to stay where you were," said Miss Peregrine.

"After *that* noise?" said Enoch.

"I'm sorry, Jacob," Bronwyn said. "They got so upset, and I didn't know what to do. I didn't hurt 'em, did I?"

"I don't think so." I had experienced the velvety sleep induced by Mother Dust's powder, and it wasn't a bad place to spend a few hours. "Can I see my uncle's phone?"

Bronwyn handed it to me. The screen was spider-cracked but readable. When it lit up, I saw a string of texts from my aunt:

What's happening?

When will u be home?

Everything ok??

In reply, Uncle Bobby had started to type *CALL THE COPS* and then probably realized that he could just as easily call them himself. But Bronwyn had taken his phone before he was able to. If she'd been a few seconds slower, we might've had a visit from the SWAT team. My chest tightened as I realized how fast our situation could have become dangerous and complicated. *Hell*, I thought, looking from the ruined car to the ruined wall to the ruined garage door. *It already has.*

"Don't worry, Jacob. I've handled much stickier situations." Miss Peregrine was walking around the car, examining the damage. "Your family will sleep soundly until morning, and I daresay we should try to do the same."

"And then what?" I said, anxious and starting to sweat. The unair-conditioned garage was sweltering.

"When they wake, I'll wipe their recent memories and send your uncles home."

"But what will they—"

"I'll explain that we're distant relatives from your father's side of the family, here from Europe to pay our respects at Abe's grave. And as for your appointment at the asylum, you're feeling much better now and no longer require psychiatric care."

"And what about—"

"Oh, they'll believe it; normals are highly suggestible following a memory wipe. I could probably convince them we're visitors from a moon colony."

"Miss Peregrine, please stop doing that."

She smiled. "My apologies. A century of headmistressing trains you to anticipate questions for the sake of expediency. Now come along, children, we need to discuss protocol for the next several days. There's much to learn about the present, and no time like the present to start learning."

She began herding everyone out of the garage while they peppered her with questions and complaints:

"How long can we stay?" said Olive.

"May we go exploring in the morning?" said Claire.

"I would like to eat something before I perish from the earth," said Millard.

Soon, I was alone in the garage, lingering partly because I felt bad about leaving my family there overnight, but also because I was anxious about their impending memory wipe. Miss Peregrine seemed confident, but this would be a bigger wipe than the one she had performed on them in London, which had only deleted about ten minutes of their memories. What if she didn't erase enough, or erased too much? What if my dad forgot all he knew about birds, or my mom forgot all the French she learned in college?

I watched them sleep for a minute, this new weight settling upon me. I felt suddenly, uncomfortably adult, while my family—vulnerable, peaceful, drooling a bit—looked almost like babies.

Maybe there was another way.

Emma leaned in through the open door. "Everything okay? I think the boys are going to riot if dinner doesn't appear soon."

"I wasn't sure I should leave them," I said, nodding toward my family.

"They aren't going anywhere, and they shouldn't need watching. With the dose they got, they'll sleep like rocks into the middle of tomorrow."

"I know. I just . . . I feel a little bad."

"You shouldn't." She came and stood next to me. "It's not your fault. At all."

I nodded. "It seems a little tragic, is all."

"What does?"

"That Abe Portman's son will never know how special a man his father was."

Emma took my arm and draped it over her shoulders. "I think it's a hundred times more tragic that he'll never know how special a man his son is."

I was just leaning down to kiss her when my uncle's phone buzzed in my pocket. It made us both startle, and I pulled it out to find a new text from my aunt.

Is crazy J in the loony bin yet?

"What is it?" Emma asked.

"Nothing important." I returned the phone to my pocket and turned toward the door. Suddenly, leaving my family in the garage overnight didn't seem like such a bad idea. "Come on, let's figure out dinner."

"Are you sure?" Emma said.

"Very."

I flipped off the lights as we left.

• • •

I suggested we order pizza from a place that delivered late. Only a few of the kids even knew what pizza was, and delivery was a totally foreign concept.

"They prepare it remotely and bring it to your *home*?" said Horace, as if the idea were vaguely scandalous.

"Pizza—is that Floridian cuisine?" asked Bronwyn.

"Not really," I said. "But trust me, you'll like it."

I called in a massive order and we settled onto couches and chairs in the living room to wait for it to arrive. Miss Peregrine whispered in my ear, "*I think it's time to make that speech.*" Without waiting for a reply, she cleared her throat and announced to the room that I had something to say. So I stood up and began, somewhat awkwardly, to improvise.

"I'm so glad you're all here. I'm not sure if you know where my family was taking me tonight, but it wasn't a good place. I mean—" I hesitated. "I mean, it might be good for *some* people, you know, with real mental problems, but . . . long story short, you guys saved my ass."

Miss Peregrine frowned.

"It was you that saved *our* . . . bums," said Bronwyn, glancing at the headmistress. "We were only returning the favor."

"Well, thanks. When you all first arrived, I thought you were a dream. I've been dreaming about you visiting me here ever since we met. So it was pretty hard to believe it was really happening. Anyway, the point is, you *are* here, and I hope I can make you feel as welcome as you made me feel when I came to stay in your loop." I nodded and looked to the floor, suddenly self-conscious. "So, basically, thrilled you're here, love you guys, speech over."

"We love you, too!" Claire said, and she leapt out of her seat and ran to hug me. Then Olive and Bronwyn joined her, and soon almost everyone was bear-hugging the breath out of me.

"We're so happy to be here," said Claire.

"And not in Devil's Acre," added Horace.

"We'll have ever so much fun!" sang Olive.

"Sorry we broke part of your house," said Bronwyn.

"What do you mean, *we*?" said Enoch.

"Can't breathe," I gasped. "Squeezing too hard—"

The pack expanded enough for me to inhale. Then Hugh inserted himself into the gap and poked me in the chest.

"You know it's not *all* of us who are here, right?" A solitary bee zipped around him in agitated circles. The others moved back, giving Hugh and his angry bee some space. "When you said you were glad we were *all* here. Well, we're not."

It took me a moment to realize what he meant, and then I felt ashamed. "I'm sorry, Hugh. I didn't mean to leave out Fiona."

He looked down at his fuzzy striped socks. "Sometimes I feel like everyone but me has forgotten her." His bottom lip trembled, and then he clenched his fists to make it stop. "She's not dead, you know."

“I hope you’re right.”

He met my eyes, defiant. “She’s *not*.”

“Okay. She’s *not*.”

“I really miss her, Jacob.”

“We all do,” I said. “I didn’t mean to leave her out, and I haven’t forgotten her.”

“Apology accepted,” Hugh said, and then he wiped his face, turned on his heel, and walked out of the room.

“If you can believe it,” Millard said after a moment, “that was progress.”

“He’ll barely even talk to any of us,” said Emma. “He’s angry, and he won’t face the truth.”

“You don’t think it’s possible Fiona could be alive somewhere?” I asked.

“I’d rate it unlikely,” said Millard.

Miss Peregrine winced and put a finger to her lips—she’d been gliding toward us across the room—and with a hand on our backs, she pushed us into a private huddle. “We put out word to every loop and peculiar community we’re in contact with,” she said quietly. “We’ve distributed communiques, bulletins, photographs, detailed descriptions—I even sent Miss Wren’s pigeon scouts to search the forests for Fiona. Thus far, nothing.”

Millard sighed. “If she was alive, poor thing, wouldn’t she have reached out to us by now? We aren’t difficult to find.”

“I guess so,” I said. “But has anyone tried looking for her . . . um . . .”

“Her body?” Millard said.

“Millard, please,” said the headmistress.

“Was that indelicate? Should I have chosen a less exact term?”

“Just be *quiet*,” Miss Peregrine hissed.

Millard didn’t lack feeling; he just wasn’t good at minding the feelings of others.

“The fall that likely killed Fiona,” Millard said, “occurred in Miss Wren’s menagerie loop, which has since collapsed. If her body was there, it is no longer recoverable.”

“I’ve been weighing whether to hold a memorial service,” Miss Peregrine said. “But I can’t even raise the topic without sending Hugh into a spiral of depression. I fear if we push him too hard—”

“He won’t even adopt new bees,” said Millard. “He says he wouldn’t love them the same if they’d never met Fiona, so he only keeps the one, who’s of a rather advanced age at this point.”

“Sounds like this change of scenery might do him good,” I said.

Just then the doorbell rang. And not a moment too soon, as the mood in the room was growing heavier by the second.

Claire and Bronwyn tried to follow me down the hall, but Miss Peregrine snapped at them. “I don’t think so! You’re not ready to talk to normals yet.”

I didn’t think there was much risk in them meeting the pizza delivery guy—until I opened the door to see a kid I knew from school, balancing a stack of pizza boxes in his hands.

"Ninety-four sixty," he mumbled, then jerked his head in recognition. "Oh, snap. Portman?"

"Justin. Hey."

His name was Justin Pamperton, though everyone called him Pampers. He was one of the pothead skaters who haunted the outer parking lots of our school.

"You look good," he said. "Are you, like, better now?"

"What do you mean?" I said, not actually wanting to know what he meant, counting out his money as quickly as I could. (I had earlier raided my parents' sock drawer, where they always kept a couple hundred bucks stashed.)

"Word is you went, like, *off the deep end*. No offense."

"Uh, nope," I said. "I'm fine."

"Righteous," he said, nodding like a bobblehead figurine. "Cause what *I* heard was—"

He stopped mid-sentence. Someone inside was laughing.

"Dude, are you having a party right now?"

I took the pizzas from him, shoved the bills into his hand. "Something like that. Keep the change."

"With *girls*?" He tried to peek into the house, but I shifted to block his view. "I'm off in an hour. I can pick up some beers . . ."

I had never wanted anyone off my porch so badly.

"Sorry, it's kind of a private thing."

He looked impressed. "You handle that, dogg." He raised a hand to high-five me, realized I couldn't because of the pizzas, then made a fist and shook it. "See you in a week, Portman."

"In a week?"

"*School*, bro! What planet have you been living on?" He jogged off toward his idling hatchback, shaking his head and laughing to himself.

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Conversation ground to a halt as the pizza was distributed, and for a full three minutes there was only the sound of lips smacking and the occasional satisfied grunt. In the lull I kept replaying Justin's words. School started in a week, and somehow I had forgotten all about it. Before my parents decided I was certifiable and tried to have me committed, I'd made up my mind to go back to school. My plan had been to stick it out at home long enough to graduate, then escape to London so I could be with Emma and my friends. But now the friends I had thought so distant, and the world I had thought so inaccessible, had landed on my doorstep, and in the space of one night everything changed. My friends were now free to roam anywhere (and anytime) they liked. Could I really imagine sitting through interminable classes and lunch periods and mandatory assemblies every day while all that was waiting for me?

Maybe not, but it was too much to figure out right at that moment, pizza in my lap, still dizzy with the idea that any of this was possible. School didn't start for

a week. There was time. Right now all I needed to do was eat and enjoy the company of my friends.

"This is the best food in the world!" Claire announced through a mouthful of gooey cheese. "I'll be having this every night."

"Not if you want to live out the week," said Horace, plucking the olives off his slice with fastidious precision. "There's more sodium in this than in the whole Dead Sea."

"Worried you'll get fat?" Enoch laughed. "Fat Horace. That I'd like to see."

"That I'll *bloat*," said Horace. "My clothes are tailored just so, unlike the flour sacks you wear."

Enoch glanced down at his clothes—a collarless gray shirt under a black vest, fraying black pants, and patent leather shoes that had long ago lost their shine. "I got these in *Pah-ree*," he said in an exaggerated French accent, "from a fashionable fellow who was no longer in need of them."

"From a *dead* fellow," said Claire, her lips curling in disgust.

"Funeral parlors are the best secondhand boutiques in the world," said Enoch, taking a massive chomp of pizza. "You've just got to get the clothes before their occupant begins to leak."

"Well, there goes my appetite," said Horace, tossing his plate down on the coffee table.

"Pick that up and finish it," Miss Peregrine scolded him. "We don't waste food."

Horace sighed and picked up his plate again. "Sometimes I envy Nullings. He could gain a hundred pounds and no one would notice."

"I'm quite svelte, for your information," said Millard, and made a sound that could only have been his hand smacking his bare stomach. "Come have a feel if you don't believe me."

"I'll pass, thanks."

"For bird's sake, *clothe* yourself, Millard," said Miss Peregrine. "What have I said about unnecessary nudity?"

"What does it matter if no one can see me?" Millard replied.

"It's in bad taste."

"But it's so hot here!"

"Now, Mr. Nullings."

Millard stood up from the couch and grumbled something about *prudes* as he breezed past, then came back a minute later with a bath towel tied loosely around his waist. But Miss Peregrine disapproved of this, too, and sent him away again. When he returned the second time, he was overdressed in clothes he'd ransacked from my closet: hiking boots, wool pants, a coat, a scarf, a hat, and gloves.

"Millard, you'll perish of heatstroke!" said Bronwyn.

"At least no one will have to imagine me in a state of nature!" he said, which had the desired effect of annoying Miss Peregrine. She announced that it was time for another security check and left the room.

The laughs many of us had been holding in burst out.

"Did you see her face?" said Enoch. "She was ready to kill you, Nullings!"

The dynamic between the kids and Miss Peregrine had shifted a bit. They seemed more like teenagers now—real ones, beginning to chafe against her authority.

“You’re all being rude!” said Claire. “Stop it right now!”

Well, not *all* of them were chafing.

“Don’t you find it wearying, being lectured about every little thing?” said Millard.

“*Little thing!*” Enoch said, then burst out laughing all over again. “Millard has a—*oww!*”

Claire had bit him on the shoulder with her backmouth, and while Enoch was rubbing the spot, she said, “No, I *don’t* find it wearying. And it *is* strange for you to be nude in mixed company for no good reason.”

“Ahh, balderclap,” said Millard. “Does it bother anyone else?”

All the girls raised their hands.

Millard sighed. “Well, then. I shall endeavor to be fully dressed at all times, lest anyone be made uncomfortable by basic facts of biology.”

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We talked and talked. There was so much to catch up on. We slipped back into easy familiarity so quickly that it felt like we’d only been apart a few days, but it had been almost six weeks. A lot had happened in that time—to them, anyway—though I’d gotten only occasional updates in the letters Emma sent. They took turns describing adventures they’d had exploring peculiar places via the Panloopticon—though only loops that had been pre-scouted and deemed safe by the ymbrynes, since it was not well-known what lay waiting behind all of the Panloopticon’s doors.

They had visited a loop in ancient Mongolia and watched a peculiar shepherd speak the language of sheep, tending his flock without a stick or a dog, just the sound of his own voice. Olive’s favorite had been a trip to a loop in the Atlas Mountains of North Africa, where in a certain little town every peculiar could float just like she did. They had strung nets everywhere above the town so the people could go about their days without weighing themselves down, and they bounced from place to place like acrobats in zero gravity. There was a loop in Amazonia, too, that had become a popular place to visit: a fantastic city in the jungle made from trees, the roots and branches all knotted together to form roads and bridges and houses. The peculiars there could manipulate plants much the way Fiona did—which Hugh had found so distressing and overwhelming that he had scurried out of the loop and back to Devil’s Acre almost immediately.

“It was hot and the insects were terrible,” said Millard, “but the locals were exceedingly nice, and they showed us how they make fantastic medicines from plants.”

“And they go fishing with a special poison that stuns the fish, but doesn’t kill them,” said Emma, “so they can just scoop the ones they want out of the water.

Absolutely brilliant.”

“We did some other trips, too,” Bronwyn said. “Em, show Jacob your snaps!”

Emma hopped up from the couch beside me and ran to retrieve them from her luggage. She returned a minute later with the photos in her hand, and we gathered around a floor lamp’s glow to look at them.

“I only recently started taking pictures, and I still don’t really know what I’m doing . . .”

“Don’t be so modest,” I said. “You sent some of your photos along with your letters, and they were great.”

“Eek, I forgot about that.”

Emma was anything but boastful, but neither was she afraid to trumpet her achievements when it came to things she did well. So the fact that she was shy about her photos meant she had high standards and aspired to live up to them. Lucky for both of us—since I have a hard time faking enthusiasm—she was a natural talent. But while the composition and exposure and all that were nice (not that I’m an expert), it was the subject matter that really made them interesting—and terrible.

The first photo showed a dozen or so Victorians posing, casual as picnic-goers, on the crazily slanted roofs of houses that looked like they’d been smashed by an angry giant.

“An earthquake in Chile,” Emma explained. “Printed on non-archival paper that aged badly after we left Devil’s Acre, unfortunately.”

She flipped to the next picture: a train that had jumped its tracks and tipped over sideways. There were children—peculiar ones, presumably—sitting and standing all around it, smiling like they were having a grand old time.

“A train disaster,” said Millard. “It was carrying some sort of volatile chemical, and a few minutes after this picture was taken, we retreated to a safe distance and watched it catch fire and explode in the most terrific way.”

“What was the point of these trips?” I asked. “Seems a lot less fun than visiting some cool loop in the Amazon.”

“We were helping Sharon,” said Millard. “You remember him—tall, cloaked boatman from Devil’s Acre? Rats for friends?”

