

Elizabeth Gill

The Back Forty

A soft smile spreads across my face as the smell of spring tickles my nose. Trees gently wave in the breeze while the warm Kentucky sun sits high in the sky. I lean my head against the window and allow my eyes to shut, briefly drifting off.

I sleep longer than I mean to, waking up to my little sister banging on my door.

“Maggie? Maggie?” she calls from the other side of the door.

“What do you want?” I respond groggily, rubbing my dry eyes.

“Will you please play with me?” She asks in a small voice.

I sigh, “give me five minutes to wake up. I’ll meet you downstairs.”

I hear her give a little jump and scurry down the stairs while I shuffle my way to the bathroom to look for contact solution.

“Where are you,” I mumble to myself as I open drawers and cabinets, never knowing where I left it.

“Aha!” I say triumphantly as I find it behind a bottle of new shampoo. As I squirt some into my dry eyes, the colors cast from the stain glass window deepen and edges sharpen. Now able to see clearly, I grab a sweatshirt and head downstairs, closing the thin wooden door behind me, not wanting the kitten to get in and destroy anything like she loves to do.

“Ok,” I call out as I carefully navigate the slippery stairs in my socks, “what are we playing.”

“I want to go pet the horses,” Lia says.

“Ok,” I start to put my shoes on and follow Lia out the door, grateful I don’t have to have a tea party.

She skips off through the backyard towards the neighbor's horses. I call out to her to slow down, but she's already halfway to the horses.

While we live on a small sliver of land, we are surrounded by massive farms that range from a couple hundred acres to a few thousand. The tobacco fields around us are shining bright with this year's crop growing fast and thick while tall brown buildings sit scattered, ready for drying the plants come July. We pass our own brown tobacco barn as we head to the neighbors. We use our old barn as a tool shed, but one day when we first moved in, we opened all the slats in the walls and saw how it worked.

"Maggie! There's a baby!"

Lia snaps me back to reality as she takes off towards a field with a foal and mother grazing peacefully.

"She's so cute!" Lia practically squeals as she peers through the fence.

"Be careful, Lia. You don't want to scare them," I say quietly as I stand next to her.

Both the mare and filly lift their heads, staring off into the distance as if there was someone there. They turn to us as Lia tries to climb the fence.

"Don't you dare go in there," I say to Lia.

"I won't, I won't. I'm just trying to get a better view!"

Eventually the mare comes over, knowing we have carrots for her to snack on. After Lia has had her fill of the horses, we head back to the house.

"What's for dinner?" She asks as she skips along next to me.

"Hmm. Pasta?" I offer. Our parents often traveled for work and now that I am old enough, I take care of Lia when they were gone but cooking is not my strong suit.

"With the cheesy sauce?"

“Yes,” I give her a smile, “with the cheesy sauce.”

“Yay!” She says as she bounces off ahead of me again.

I shake my head, amazed by her never-ending energy. It’s still a little early for dinner when we get home so Lia goes to her room to play while I head back to my window seat. Before going into my room, I stop by the bookshelf on the landing of the stairs. I close my eyes and pluck a random book off the shelf.

“Snow Falling on Cedars, by David Guterson,” I read and shrug. Tucking it under my arm I turn towards my door.

“Shit,” the door was wide open and inside sat our little grey kitten, Petal.

“How did you get in here, huh?” I ask as I scoop her up and bring her to the window seat.

I must not have closed the other door all the way, I think as I settle into my seat with Petal in my lap. My room has two doors, one leading directly to one set of stairs and Lia’s room, while the other leads to a living room of sorts with a couch, TV, and stairs down to the kitchen. Luckily, it didn’t look like Petal had destroyed anything.

The book sits unopened in my lap as I absently stroke a sleeping Petal and stare out the window. The rolling hills are picturesque, with cows and horses interrupting the carpet of green. Nestled on top of a hill near the mare and filly sits a small cemetery.

I wonder who’s buried there, I think as the sun starts to sink and the sky breaks out in pinks and purples.

Soon it is time to make dinner and I head back downstairs, this time making sure both doors are firmly shut behind me and Petal is not in the room.

Lia wants to watch a movie after dinner, so we watch *The Lorax* and Lia nearly immediately falls asleep.

Once the movie is over, I gently shake her awake, “ok, Lia. It’s late. We should go to bed.”

“Okay,” she says through a yawn as she grabs her stuffed bunny and slowly stands.

“Don’t forget to brush your teeth!” I call after her as she heads upstairs.

I lock all the doors, turn off lights, and head up after her. Petal is sitting outside my door, begging me to let her in.

“Alright, alright. You can sleep with me tonight,” I say as I open the door and she bolts inside.

As I go to get in bed, I notice my stuffed cow, Steak, who I always face the same direction, is facing the other way.

That’s weird, I think as I pull back the covers and climb into bed.

I leave the window open and the wind in the trees creates a calming soundtrack that lures me to sleep.

I wake as a feeling of being watched pulls me out of my dream. Disoriented I look around the dark room. Nothing has changed. The old brick fireplace sits unlit, the doors are all shut, Petal lies asleep at my feet, and Steak is firmly clutched to my chest.

Rolling over, I try to go back to sleep, but can’t shake the strange feeling.

I must have fallen asleep at some point because the next thing I know, the sun is shining through the window, giving the room a lightness beyond the physical.

Groggily, I sit up and rub my eyes. Petal gives a big stretch and rubs her body against my legs.

“Good morning, little one,” I say as I pet her head.

I glance at the clock, realizing it’s later than I thought, and start to get up.

Luckily, Lia is old enough to get herself up and make her own breakfast.

Petal and I wander downstairs and see Lia sitting at the kitchen table with a big bowl of Froot Loops in front of her.

“Hi!” She exclaims, always a morning person.

“Good morning,” I reply groggily as I grab my own bowl for cereal.

“Can we go pet the horses again today?” She asks hopefully.

“Yeah, we can go see them again.”

“Yay!”

After breakfast, we go back upstairs, and Lia plays in her room while I take my book back to the window seat.

The world fades away as I’m pulled into the murder mystery novel. Everything is quiet with only the occasional snort of a horse breaking the silence.

Suddenly my head snaps up. The room had quickly turned claustrophobic and still.

“Hello?” I ask shakily.

I jump as a young girl seems to float out of the bathroom.

“Hi,” she quietly whispers back with a small smile.

“Who are you? Where did you come from?” I could practically hear my heart beating in my chest.

“I’m Alice,” she says as she floats back towards the bed, “I live here.”

“What do you mean, you live here?”

“This is my bed. This is where I grew up.”

“Have you been here this whole time?” I ask suspiciously.



“Yes,” she replies.

Things start to fall into place in my head; the door I swear I closed, Steak being turned the other way, the feeling of being watched...

A white haze hovers around her, creating a stark difference between her and her dark dress that buttons up to the base of her neck. A thin white collar shines bright, breaking up the otherwise plain brown plaid. It cinches at her waist before flowing out into a long skirt that nearly touches the ground. Soft blond curls bounce at her shoulders as she seems to catch the light and fade slightly.

My stomach drops and I glance towards the cemetery again.

“I’m not buried there,” Alice says as she watches me turn, “my father and uncles are though.”

“Who else lives here?”

“Me, mother, father, and my sister.”

“How old are you exactly?” I look the young girl up and down.

“Now that is not a polite question to ask,” she giggles again as she sits on the edge of the bed.

“Sorry, you just seem so young. I have so many questions.”

Am I dreaming? Surely I’m asleep and this isn’t real.

She tips her head at me, “I can answer some, but likely not all. There are rules, you know.”

I nodded back not sure I did know.

“So,” I start again, “how did you die? Or is that question off limits?”

Alice laughs, “How direct! I died of old age, but loved being a child in this house, so that’s how I present myself. Plus, children’s dresses are so much more comfortable.”

“I see. Why have I not seen you before?”

She shrugs, “I didn’t feel like making myself visible. But I wanted to feel your stuffed cow, it just looked so soft, and I had to take shape to do that.”

Now it was my turn to laugh. I walk over to the bed and untuck Steak. Handing him to her I say, “this is Steak.”

“You named your cow Steak? Isn’t that a bit odd?”

I shrug, “I think it’s fitting.”

She plays with his fluffy hair and hands him back to me, “I had a bunny as a child, but she was nowhere near as soft as Steak.”

“My little sister has a bunny.”

“Oh yes, I know. Mine was quite similar.”

She drifts towards the window.

“I saw you reading over here. I used to take naps in this seat. Mama would scold me; it would wrinkle my dress.”

Without saying goodbye, she drifts through the window and towards the cemetery where a man clearly stands, watching the house and the horses.

Another shiver runs down my spine as they both fade out of sight.

“Lia!” I call as I burst into her room.

She looks up at me expectantly.

“You would not believe what just happened.”

“What?”

“I just talked to a ghost. Of a little girl who used to live in my room.”

“WHAT?!” She shrieks, “I wanna talk to a ghost!”

“I don’t know why she did, but she did. Maybe she will come around again.”

Lia pouts as she says again, “I want to talk to a ghost.”

Changing the subject I say, “should we go see the horses again?”

Lia nods and we head out the back door, grabbing carrots on the way, and venture off to see the mare and foal.

When we get back, it’s lunch time. As we sit eating sandwiches, Alice suddenly floats through the door. I’m so immersed in my book I don’t even notice until Lia silently pokes me in the side.

“What?” I look at Lia and see her pointing. I follow her finger.

“Oh. Hi, Alice.”

“Hello, Maggie,” she replied, “and you must be?”

“A-Amelia. But everyone calls me Lia,” Lia answers shyly.

“Pleasure to meet you, Lia. I’m Alice.”

Cautiously I say, “was that your dad you went to see?”

“Yes,” she says as she strokes Petal’s head, “that was my father.”

“How did he die?”

She was quiet for a moment before replying, “he died in the war. I was very young.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that. Does he only see you at the age he died at?”

She nods back.

“Is your mother here?”

She nods again.

“Can I meet her?”

Alice’s eyes shoot up to mine before she forcefully says, “no.”

“Ok,” I say as casually as I can, my heart pounding in my chest, as I go back to petting Petal while Lia stares open mouthed at the ghost.

“You can meet Mama though,” she says quietly.

“Mama?” I ask.

She nods again.

“Who is mama?” I push again.

“My sister. Mother died when I was very young. Mama raised me and the other girls.”

“We would love to meet her,” I say although I’m not quite sure what I’m getting myself into.

“Follow me,” Alice says and drifts down the hallway.

She leads us through the stone hallway that connects the old and new parts of the house. The house was very old and had multiple expansions built onto it in the many years since it was built in 1825. There were even tunnels in the basement though I had no desire to investigate them further. The coldness of the stone floor seeps through my feet and spreads through my whole body as we come to my parent’s office that I rarely set foot in.

“Mama?” Alice calls out, “Someone wants to meet you.”

A girl, likely in her early twenties, floats through the door opposite us. She wears a dress much like Alice’s, although the sleeves are tight and long and there is no white collar to break up the dull, dark color of the dress. As I take her in, I realize she and Alice had very few similarities to them. Alice’s blonde hair and fair skin stand out against Mama’s dark hair and skin.

The confusion must have shown on my face because Mama finally says, “we are half sisters. We have different mothers.”

“I – I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to stare,” I trip over my words.

Mama chuckles lightly and looks at Alice, “I like this one.”

She floats over to me and curtseys, “it is a pleasure to meet you, Maggie,” she looks to Lia, “and you, little one. Please, call me Mama.”

“How do you know my name?”

She laughs and gives me a wink, “I know everything.”

To Alice she says, “darling, I am exhausted. I must rest.”

Alice nods and we all watch as she disappears as quickly as she appeared.

I glance at Lia whose eyes are bright despite her face being white as a sheet. You would think she’d seen a ghost or something she was so pale.

“I too, shall take my leave,” Alice says as she drifts off after Mama.

“Maggie?” Lia asks shakily, “did that really just happen?”

I just nod.

“Wow,” she whispers.

I nod again.

Suddenly the doorbell rings, making us both jump.

“Ellie,” we say in unison. Lia’s friend was here to pick her up for a sleepover.

Taking a deep breath, I open the door, “Hey! Lia’s just gone upstairs to grab her stuff.”

A few minutes later Lia is on her way to Ellie’s, and it is just me and Petal in the house. Well, and Alice. And Mama. And who knows who else.

Suddenly, curiosity overcomes me, and I find myself rushing out the back door and towards the cemetery on top of the hill.

I don't step inside the fenced area, but I am still able to read the big tombstone.

"Richard Alexander Hayes," I murmur to myself.

There are two smaller tombstones next to his, William and James. *His brothers*. I'm about to go when I notice several smaller rocks dotted about the plot. *Slaves? Unborn children? Would Alice know?*

I turn back towards the house, the sky a mix of pinks and purples as the porch lights flicker on for the night. I take in the old brick house, trying to imagine Alice and her family living there as my family does now. As I look closer, my heart stops in my chest.

I was the only one home, my parents gone for the weekend, but their bathroom light was on, and I could see something moving inside. *It's probably just Petal. She must have rubbed against the light switch. Don't be so paranoid.*

Taking a deep breath, I walk back to the house, trying to calm myself the entire time. By the time I make it back, the stars are coming out and the light is off. *Maybe I imagined it.*

Petal welcomes me when I open the back door, purring and rubbing her little body against my legs.

"Hi little one," I say as I reach down to pet her head.

The rest of the evening goes by quickly, with no sighting of ghosts. But I still feel watched when I get into bed and open my laptop. *Is Alice asleep next to me? Do ghosts sleep?* Not sure where to even start, I go to ancestry.com and make an account. After a few tries, I find the correct Richard Alexander Hayes and start scrolling through their family tree. At the bottom,

Alice Hayes. *Born 1853.* I scroll up slightly and find Mama whose name is actually Mary. *Born 1840. Died, 1865.*

“What are you doing?”

I jump and slam my computer shut at the same time as Alice floats through my door.

“Jesus Christ, Alice! You’re going to give me a heart attack!”

“Do not say the Lord’s name in vain. What are you doing?” She asks again.

“I’m doing research. For a school project,” the lie rolls off my tongue.

Can ghosts detect lies?

I can tell she’s skeptical, but she doesn’t say anything else. Petal stares at the empty space that Alice exists in and follows the ghost with her eyes as she drifts back through the door. Heart still pounding, I leave my laptop shut and attempt to sleep.

Once again, the sun wakes me up the next morning. Scared to see Alice, I throw on clothes as quickly as I can, shove my laptop in my backpack, and jump in my car. I don’t take a breath until I am a few miles down the road and know Alice can’t be following me. I go to my favorite bakery and no longer terrified of being watched, open my computer.

I get sucked into their family tree, noticing that Richard’s brothers died before him, though the cause was not clear. They seemed to have died in a fight, but not during the Civil War as Richard had.

I decided to give the library a shot as there was not much information online.

I wander through the quiet library trying to find a librarian.

“Can I help you?” A middle-aged woman with a kind smile asks.

“Hi. I hope so. I’m trying to find some information on a family from the Civil War era.”

“Hmm. Are they a famous family?” She asks as she types a few things into her computer.

I shake my head, “I don’t think so. It’s the family that used to own my house. There’s an old cemetery on the property and I was just wondering if there was any information on them.”

“I see. And what’s the name?”

“Richard Alexander Hayes.”

The keyboard clicks and clacks as she types the name in.

“Sulphur Well Road?”

I nod.

“Hmmm. All I’m finding is their bill of sale and family tree.”

“That’s odd,” she continues, “there’s a legal document here that seems to state they cannot sell about 1,000 acres due to ‘religious reasons’ that are not entirely clear. There also seems to have been a large fire in one of their barns on that piece of land.”

“What?”

She turns the computer towards me, “see these lines? This is how it was broken up. This is what was sold and what wasn’t.”

My heart drops as I orient myself with the property. The section they couldn’t sell was a little way behind our house and spanned a large part of the map. *Is this why the ghosts were still around? Are they hiding something?*

“There’s nothing else about that piece of land?” I ask.

She shakes her head, “I’m afraid not. Sorry I can’t be of more help.”

I thank her and give her a smile before heading back to my car, gears turning in my head.

I don’t remember the drive home; I’m so immersed in my own thoughts about possibilities. *I really need to talk to the ghosts again.*

As I turn into my driveway, an uneasy weight lands on my shoulders. My eyes glance to my rearview mirror, but nothing is there besides empty road.

I shake my head and mutter to myself, “snap out of it. No one is following you.”

Once again, Petal is waiting at the door to greet me as I pull up and some of the unease drifts away. However, it’s replaced by panic when I look up and see Mary sitting on the counter.

“Mary!” I exclaim.

She frowns, “please, call me Mama.”

“You scared me!”

“Humans,” she says dismissively.

Petal and I both watch as she floats to the window looking over the cemetery.

“Where did you go last night.”

“What?”

She glares at me, “Where. Did. You. Go.”

Jesus Christ these ghosts could be scary.

“Um. Just for a walk?”

“Where?” She narrows her eyes.

“Just around the property... Why?”

She didn’t answer me and went back to looking out the window.

“Can I ask something?”

She turns back to me, “You can but I might not answer.”

“Are you at peace?”

“Yes,” she gave a sad smile, “but not everyone here is.”

“Oh. Is it your uncles? Or your father?”

“What do you know about them?” She asks sharply.

“Nothing,” I say quickly, “I just went up to the cemetery yesterday.

“Why.”

“I was curious. I didn’t go inside,” I add.

“Good,” she said, “don’t.”

“Why not?”

“Those who are buried there are not at rest and are dangerous.”

“What do you mean, not at rest?”

“Just do not set foot in the cemetery. Leave your curiosity behind.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

She looked at me expectantly.

“Why can’t the back portion of the farm be sold?”

She rushes over to me, stopping inches from my face, “do not go where you do not belong. I am warning you, nothing good will come of it.”

She knocks the wind out of me as she passes through me, leaving an unshakable chill.

I sit in the kitchen, scrolling through my phone trying to calm down. I can’t stop thinking about the cemetery on the other property and soon find myself slipping out the door and heading to the gap in the hedge. I take off at a sprint, knowing I shouldn’t be going back there but hoping if I go quickly, they won’t notice. I reach the top of the hill and take a breath before continuing to barrel down the hill towards the fenced area.

Once again, I do not enter the cemetery, but remain on the edge. This one is bigger than the one behind my house, but has fewer marked stones. The biggest one is marked “Zariah Hayes, mother and wife.” *Born 1819. Died 1857.*

“So young,” I mumble to myself.

“You shouldn’t be here.”

I jump and turn around, “Mama! You scared me!”

“You shouldn’t be here,” she repeated.

“Why not? What happened here?”

Mary looks past my shoulder before saying more softly, “something good, and something very, very bad.”

I cock my head, “will you tell me, or is it some super big secret like everything else?”

A sad smile briefly flashes over her face, “I’ve been sworn to secrecy, but I could ‘accidentally’ point you in the correct direction. I think it’s time someone else knew the truth.”

“Ok, so where do I begin?”

“The basement,” she says before disappearing again.

Shit. I hate basements.

Looking around, I take in as much of the area as I can, the bigger cemetery full of small markers, the skeleton of an old barn, and the isolation of the location. Alone in the field, I start to feel uneasy and quickly hurry back to my house.

My mind goes wild on the walk home, trying to come up with plausible ideas for what could have happened but drawing blanks.

Just as I get home, Ellie’s mom is dropping Lia back home.

“Did you have fun with Ellie?” I ask.

“Yeah! But have you talked to the ghosts any more?”

I smile at her, “yes and there seems to be a bit of a mystery they want us to figure out.”

“Oooo. Yay! I love mysteries!”

I laugh and say, “go put your things upstairs and then we will go to the basement. That’s where Mama said we should start.”

A few minutes later we are headed down the steep steps and into the dark basement. I flip the light switch at the bottom of the stairs and a soft light spreads out across the room. The walls are all brick with arched doorways leading into different areas almost like tunnels.

My heart starts beating faster and faster as I can’t shake the feeling I shouldn’t be here.

“Wow. This is so cool!” Lia says, “how come we never come down here?”

One corner was acting as my parent’s wine cellar, but otherwise the room remained fairly empty.

Lia steps around me and wanders through a doorway.

“Maggie! It’s like a tunnel!”

Fuck fuck fuck.

“Lia come back where I can see you, please,” I call out shakily and finally move from the stairs.

Lia grabs my hand, dragging me back through the doorway and into the darkness. My eyes take a moment to adjust to the dimness, but all they see is brick. It’s more like a room than a tunnel and my heart rate finally starts to slow.

“It looks like someone used to live here,” Lia says.

Slaves.

“Let’s go look in another one.”

We go into each of the 4 small rooms but there’s not much in them other than a few debris from over the years. I’m about to call it quits when Lia calls out to me.

“Maggie! Look!”

I look at where she's pointing and inhale sharply. Someone had carved an x over one of the bricks and removed the cement from around it, making it removable.

Lia carefully pulled the brick from the wall while I held my breath behind her.

She reached her hand in and pulled out a metal box.

"Woah! This is so cool!"

"Let's take it upstairs to get a better look," I say, having spent enough time in dark.

We go back upstairs and set the box on the kitchen counter.

It's small and light and thankfully doesn't have a lock. I wipe the dust off the top and reveal initials engraved in the center.

"RAH," Lia reads, "what does that mean?"

"Richard Alexander Hayes," I whisper.

"Who?"

"Alice's dad," I say as I open the box.

Inside are documents. Old and falling apart, the ink fading and nearly unintelligible.

What on earth are we getting ourselves into.

"What do they say?" Lia asks, peering over my shoulder.

"They are kinda hard to read, give me a second, ok?"

Lia sighs and goes to sit down while I carefully unfold the papers and skim over them.

"Holy..."

"What?" Lia asks expectantly.

I look up, "Richard Alexander was part of the Union. He was helping slaves escape on the underground railroad."

"There was a railroad?"

I shake my head, forgetting Lia was too young to have learned this in school yet and has no idea what I'm talking about, "during the Civil War which was the war Alice's dad died in, there was a path that slaves would try to escape to the north on. Richard seems to be helping them despite Kentucky being pro-slavery at the time."

Seeing her blank face I tried again, "he was like a spy who helped people. But I think he was caught. Some of the pages are hard to read."

"So, he was a good guy?"

"Yes."

"So why are the ghosts so creepy then?"

I laughed, "that's a great question."

"What did you find?"

Lia and I both jump as Alice floats through the front door.

"Alice! You scared me," I respond, hand over my heart.

She looks at the box, "ah. You've found my father's work."

"Why was it hidden?"

"As you can imagine we had to keep it all secret to keep the slaves safe."

I nod and look back at the other documents I hadn't read yet.

"But what happened to your uncles?"

Alice visibly stiffened, "I cannot speak of it."

As quickly as she came, she disappeared again.

"What the hell," I mutter.

"What now?" Lia asks.

"I'm not sure. Why don't you go unpack your stuff while I keep looking at these, ok?"

She nods and scurries upstairs, Petal hot on her heels.

I flip back through the documents, trying to read the faded ink. A weight falls over me.

“Hey, Mama,” I say, not even looking up.

“I see you found my box,” a male voice breaks through the room.

My head shoots up and I realize I am face to face with Richard Alexander.

“I-um-hi- I’m Maggie,” I stammer out.

“Yes, I am aware. I’m glad you have found my box,” his eyes soften, “it’s time the secrets were out, don’t you think.”

“Uh. Yeah. What secrets, exactly?”

He moves around the counter so that he is next to me. He wrinkled hands reach for the paper in front of him and he scans it as if reminding himself what he wrote eons ago. A sad smile crosses his lips as he looks back at me.

“I’m sorry my daughters have been so flighty. They were under my instructions not to reveal our family secrets.”

“I see,” I say trying to remain calm.

“You see, what I was doing, helping the slaves, was very illegal. While the Union regained control of Kentucky later in the war, early on it was very much controlled by the Confederates. It’s the south after all. And we had tobacco to harvest so why wouldn’t we want slaves? But it just didn’t sit right with me, and I tried to help who I could,” he sighed heavily.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Well, you see, I got a bit too big for my britches and it cost a lot of lives. Including my brothers,” he added sadly.

“I’m so sorry.”

“I had been helping a few slaves here and there get to the Underground Railroad, it was only a few miles from here. People got wind of me helping and started sending more and more slaves this way. I kept them in the barn out by the old cemetery until it was safe for them to move. But one night some locals came to confront me and... things got messy.”

He rubbed his stubble before continuing, “they tried to go down to the barn and hard as my brothers tried to fight them, their lives along with everyone else’s were lost. I was allowed to live under the conditions I erased myself from history and fought for the Confederates. You see, they had my wife. They used her as leverage. I couldn’t refuse.”

“I’m so sorry,” I repeated quietly.

“I’ve kept it secret for so long to not taint my family’s name.”

“Why are you telling me now?”

He finally looks over at me, “because you and your sister remind me of my daughters. I feel like God is telling me it’s okay and that we can rest now. Now that the secret is out that is.”

The weight of what he has just said finally hits me.

“You’ve been living here this whole time because you were scared of people finding out?”

He shakes his head, “we cannot be welcomed into His kingdom until our conscious is clear. That is why we have been here so long. But now, now we can finally rest.”

“What am I to do with this?”

He shrugs, “whatever you want. It was lovely to meet you, dear Margaret. Once upon a time I had a daughter Margaret. She was taken from us much too soon. Perhaps I can meet her now.”

He drifts off, through the back door and back towards the cemetery.

I watch him, my heart heavy.

“Maggie,” Mama says softly, appearing behind me.

I turn, “yes?”

“I’ve come to say goodbye. As father said, we can now rest,” she says with a smile,
“Alice is telling Lia now. I have already bid her farewell.”

“Oh.”

“It was lovely to meet you,” she gives me a low curtsy, “I wish you well.”

I return the curtsy, “I’m glad you can finally rest.”

“Yes, thank you,” she smiles before drifting off after Richard Alexander just as Alice came down from the stairs, followed by Lia.

“I suppose Mama told you,” Alice says with a smile.

“Yes. It was lovely to meet you,” I say in a daze as she gives me a curtsy just as Mama did.

“Perhaps we shall meet again,” she turns to Lia and smiles, “remember all I told you.”

Lia gives her a small smile back and we watch as she follows the same path as her sister and father.

“What. The. Hell.”

“Lia!” I exclaim, “you can’t say that.”

“But you say it.”

“Yeah, but I’m older. I’m allowed.”

“Whatever. What now?”

“Should we go pet the horses?”

She eagerly nods and we head the same direction as the Hayes family, veering off towards the horses at the last minute, trying to figure out if this weekend was real or not. No one was going to believe us tomorrow in school, that was for sure.
