

## Chapter V: Flannery Park

“Are you serious? I can have these?” CJ picked up a few older looking mythology books that had been crammed into the bottom of the box. The pages were all yellowed and the edges had been tattered. He thumbed carefully flipped through the pages of Mrs. Lange’s shabby books. Various pages sent up little puffs of dust and let out that old library book smell. He was simply fascinated with old books of all kinds.

“Really, Ceej. What would I want with them?” Alexis gave him an ‘are you insane?’ look and leaned back against the big oak tree which was shading them.

Flannery Park was the afternoon locale for the group. It had once been a farm owned by one of the founding members of Abingdon. Stephen Flannery and his wife donated all of their lands and money to the community. The main farm house was turned into a public library, and the lush grounds around it became a community park. It housed some of the most beautiful trees and gardens in the town along with activities for the children to do.

Much of the other land was sold off to help make money for the community. The park and library remained as it was one of the community’s most valuable treasures. The only other memory of the Flannery legacy was an old farm house on the outskirts of the park. The story is that it was built for Celia Flannery, who died an old maid. Of course, the story concludes with her haunting the house as well. Flannery Manor was often the subject of children’s pranks and ghost stories. Most people tried to avoid the house when possible.

CJ looked up at the library across the greens, “I wonder if it’s open today. I’ve never heard of these titles before. I wonder if they’re referenced in any other books.”

“Can we not be nerds today?” Alexis was always the voice of protest when it came to doing something possibly intellectual on her down time. She severely wanted CJ to learn to relax once in awhile.

“No, it’s fine. I can just look on the ‘net later,” CJ closed the books and stared at the titles hoping they’d jog his memory.

The three books had plain leather bindings. Two were brownish and one was a red color. Letters on the front were pressed into the leather with gold leaf. The letters were very detailed like calligraphy and were simply fascinating. CJ felt like he was

holding something ancient and something valuable. He always felt like that when he handled old books.

“I’m sure it won’t be hard to find some information on them. They look like they’re of some kind of value and content,” Claudia wrapped the green cape around her shoulders and then took it off after smelling the distinct odor of moth balls. She couldn’t stand moth balls, “Your mom really wanted to preserve this stuff, though. I just wonder why she wants to throw it out.”

“I guess it’s just not important to her anymore,” Alexis shrugged and didn’t really care. She was happy to be of service to her friends for a change. Sometimes she felt like the black sheep of the group since her interests like outside of the realm of arts and literature. Only once did she ever make her feelings known, and soon after, Claudia made the attempt to try Alexis’ hobbies as well as CJ’s.

CJ made no such attempt which was fine with Alexis since she really had no interest in picking up classic literature and reading it. Claudia was the tie that bound them all together anyway. On a normal day, Alexis probably wouldn’t have been friends with CJ if based on interests alone. CJ was a nice guy and he made her laugh. Despite all of their differences, they all just had fun with each other.

“Well, thank you, Lex. This is really neat stuff,” CJ put his hand on her outstretched shoe and shook it as sign of thanks.

“No problem, my man,” She sat back up and looked at the box, “Although, I am disappointed that there really wasn’t anything in these about Mom’s family. I was hoping to find out something new.”

Claudia frowned feeling bad for Alexis. She rummaged around some of the jewelry since silver always attracted her eye. There was plenty of silver in the box. Picking up a locket, she ran her fingers over the engraved flowers on the front, “Maybe you should just sit down and talk with her, Lex. She needs to understand how much it hurts you.”

The locket was small and Claudia ran her fingernail in the seam to pop it open. There was a picture of a man in it. Glancing up at Alexis and back at the picture, she tossed it over to Alexis, “Here, this might be something.”

Alexis ran her fingernail in between the lips of the front and back half. It popped open for her and she eyed the small black and white photograph. The picture was of a young man. He couldn't have been more than twenty. His hair was long and dark, sleek and straight. Alexis' attention focused on the man's dark eyes. They seemed to stare at her and seemed too familiar. Yes, of course they did. She thought they looked like her own.

"You think it might be my dad?" Alexis asked with a bit of hesitance in her voice. His features were awfully similar to her features, "I've never seen a picture of him before."

Stammering, she went on, "Or maybe it's a relative. Maybe..."

"You should ask your mom," CJ leaned over and compared the picture to his friend.

"She'll be mad that I took this," Alexis bit her lip wondering which fate would be worse. Not knowing the answer or having her mother mad at her.

"Tell her you knocked over the box and it fell out. She can't prove you didn't," Claudia shrugged.

"Yea, I think I will. I mean, I want to know if it's my old man. I don't know anything about the guy," Alexis stared at the picture some more and realized how badly she wanted to know something about her father. For years she had told herself that it didn't matter. Many of her classmates had horrible parents. She told herself that she was happy that she had one good one. If her dad was a great guy, he would be around. Deep down, it did matter to her, and she would ask. She closed the locket and put it around her neck.

"I don't care if she sees I have it first. I don't want to lose it," Alexis smiled, "Besides, it's pretty. And well, if she sees it, that will start the conversation, won't it. Who would want to throw it away? "

"Well, we've been asking that all day," Claudia smiled as they continued to study their treasure. She found a necklace of shaped quartz and put it around her own neck.

---

## Chapter VI: Fighting Words

The afternoon went by in a leisurely summer daze. After the gifts from Alexis became old news, they acted like children once again in the park. Claudia pumped her legs back and forth on the swing. As she neared the branches on the surrounding trees, she did what all children do and tried to reach her feet out to see if she could kick the branches. Alexis and CJ chased each other through the jungle gym and eventually settled to building a sand castle with a few kindergarteners in the sand box. It was good to be a kid sometimes.

“Hey guys, it’s getting late,” Claudia noticed that the sun was looking to start its downward spiral for the day. She jumped off the swing and sat down next to her friends.

“I need to get home,” Alexis slapped her forehead always feeling bad when she was late for dinner, “I forgot mom was bringing home dinner.”

“Yea, I want to clean up before we go to the movies,” Claudia jumped off the swing.

CJ shrugged not having anywhere in particular to go, “I guess I’ll head to the library to check out info on those books before we go, Claudia.”

“You can come back to my house for dinner and hang out. I’m sure nobody mind,” Claudia offered not liking to leave CJ alone. There was some kind of guilt on her heart that made her feel bad that CJ’s home wasn’t as inviting as her own was. She would take dealing with Danny any day over dealing with Mr. Storm.

“No, it’s okay. Thanks, though. I’m always over there and I don’t want your family to think I’m a leech,” CJ shoved his hands in his pockets to do his best to look like he was telling the truth. For the past few weeks, he had always been at a Paradis dinner and loved going to their house. After awhile, he started to just feel like an imposition. Nobody ever said it or had a different tone of voice, but he felt it. Besides, the books really were interesting and would take up much of his time.

“Well, okay, then. See you later,” Claudia stood up with and stretched her calves. She held out her dirt covered hand and put it in front of Alexis. Alexis nodded in thanks, grabbed it and Claudia pulled her to her feet. They walked past the tree where they had been sitting before and CJ went off to sit and read his books.

Once they walked out of hearing range, Alexis looked down at Claudia and whispered, "Do you ever feel bad for him?"

Claudia shrugged and glanced over her shoulder at the boy oblivious to the world around him, "Sometimes, but he wouldn't want us to. He thinks that his family is his problem and not ours."

"Not only that, but like with girls and stuff. They're so mean to him."

Claudia smiled, "He's not exactly nice to them or very outgoing. Allison completely turned him off to being nice to other girls."

Claudia then pointed her finger across the field to the old Flannery Manor house. The house was silent, old, and spooky. Nobody ever bothered it except to throw rocks through the windows to make wishes ala *It's a Wonderful Life*. No buyers ever wanted it. There was too much work to be done on the house. Not to mention, the town legends have it haunted by at least five different ghosts, including Celia Flannery. Not today. Somebody stood in the doorway and a moving van parked itself in the driveway.

"Must be insane to want to live in that old shack," Alexis said and then became distracted by a group of four teenagers who came running into the park bouncing a soccer ball between them.

Claudia didn't think anything of it. None of the people there were familiar to her from a distance. Knowing the sports players was Lex's forte. Not until they got closer did she realize who they were. Brett Meyers and Shannon DeLow were trouble with a capital T when in the vicinity of CJ Storm. They were mean and were never going to let him live down the fact that Allison played him like a fiddle. Alexis wasn't inept about this either. She turned around immediately and headed back towards where CJ was at in case there was trouble.

If there was one thing that Claudia was good at, it was reading body language. Art isn't all about what her hand can put onto paper; it was about what her eyes could see. Before Alexis realized it, Claudia could see Brett's eyes focusing in on CJ and his arm getting ready to lob the soccer ball. What intentions Brett had beyond that, Claudia could only guess. But she knew the immediate goal on Brett's head was to humiliate CJ as much as he could. He hadn't already done that enough to the boy.

“Get the ball,” Claudia said as Brett released sending the black and white streak into the trunk of the tree behind CJ.

Alexis put her hand on Claudia’s arm and said, “Hold on.”

Claudia felt Alexis use her as leverage to push off for a run. If there was anything that Alexis was good at, it was athletics. For her, it wasn’t just about being good or fast. It was about knowing your opponent and knowing the ball. Before the ball hit the tree, she could see where it was going to bounce. It was in her hands after it sailed over CJ’s head.

Shards of bark went flying down into CJ’s hair and onto his book. Brett and clan started to laugh as CJ jumped and practically hit the ground trying to duck from the well placed missile of a ball. His glasses fell off his face and red speckles of embarrassment started to etch onto his cheeks.

“I think you lost something, Meyers,” Alexis scooped up the soccer ball. As soon as it touched her hands she sent it hard into the stomach of Brett Meyers. He doubled over and gasped in shock and pain. CJ scrambled to his feet.

“Nice shot,” Claudia said under her breath and moved to Alexis’ side.

“Can’t even defend himself, can he? Has to have one of his loser girl friends come and defend him,” Brett’s cheeks got very red and his black eyes squinted with an ugly anger behind them. He was embarrassed and he wasn’t going to let anybody, especially one of these three let him look bad.

“God Brett, you think you’re so freaking cool. You’re such an idiot,” Alexis glared at him and clenched her jaw.

“Geez, Alexis, why are you hanging out with losers like this? CJ can’t get a date to save his life and well, she’s just weird,” Shana pointed at Claudia popping some gum between her crooked teeth. Shana was Allison’s best friend and one of the freshman athletic stars at North Abingdon High School. Shana Delow was Alexis’ athletic rival if ever she had one. Alexis hated everything about Shana: her perfect smile, her perfect auburn hair, her perfect pony tail, and her perfect everything. The attitude of this girl made her so ugly and yet, nobody saw it. They only saw the supermodel exterior. She was everything that Alexis was against.

“Yea, because I should hang out with real winners like you,” Alexis rolled her eyes, “Does Allison know that you’re all up on her boyfriend?”

“Just let it go, now, Alexis. Let them go away,” Claudia whispered.

“He’s not going to stand up for himself. Somebody has to,” Alexis hissed back referring to CJ. There was a fire building up in her gut that wasn’t going to let these guys get away without a fight: verbal or physical.

“Lex, sometimes you have to let it go,” Claudia said but Alexis never heard her. Shana was starting to pounce forward like a raging cat.

“You better watch yourself, Lange,” Shana had a wicked glare in her eye that would make any normal girl shudder.

“Don’t threaten me. A cow like you doesn’t scare me,” Alexis started to crack her knuckles.

And that was about as far as the fight was going to go. A booming voice hollered over the field and was quite alarming to them all, “CHILDREN STOP THIS INSTANT.” An older man, wearing a thin brown cloak that masked his facial features with shadows stormed down the main path to Flannery Park waving a notched wooden walking stick.

Fear walked into the hearts of most of them. The man looked crazy and homeless. Brett, who was about to tackle CJ onto the ground and took off forgetting his friends and his ball. Shana tripped on her own feet trying to get away. CJ, Alexis, and Claudia just looked at the man somewhat dumbfounded at his lunacy.

“He’s crazy. Get the hell away,” Brett could be heard saying to some of his friends as they were bolting down the opposite path.

“YOU HOOLIGANS. YOU DESICRATE THIS PARK AND EVERYTHING SACRED,” The man came closer and seemed even scarier through his raving madness.

“Christ, Claudia, come on. This guy is nuts,” Alexis scrambled over to CJ’s tree and helped them collect up their possessions.

Before they could leave, the man was on them. He grabbed the cloak that Claudia was clinging to from earlier in the day and started to rave to her in a hoarse voice. The shadows falling across his face from the dark cloak made him look old, mysterious, and frightening. Not many things really scared Claudia, aside from heights, but this man put

the wrath of God into her. Her eyes grew to the size of two cobalt saucers and she sat panic stricken with her knuckles turning white while clinging onto the cloak.

“Where did you get this?!” He yelled at her and tried to pry it from her fingers, “This is too good for you brats. Give it to me.”

“Let her alone,” CJ yelled as he ran up to the man with his books, “That’s ours.”

“No, you kids destroy everything you touch. You give it here,” He started to tear the fibers away from Claudia’s fingers.

“No, it’s my mum’s,” Alexis gripped over Claudia’s hands to give it one final pull away from the crazy man. The scary part was the calm that suddenly seized the man and he backed away. Both girls fell back onto their behinds and scrambled back a few steps. Claudia tried to study his face as her hands tried to stop shaking. She could see that the lines on his face were world worn but that was all she immediately could tell. The man turned from them and quickly went back the way that he came: Flannery Manor.

“He came from the Flannery Manor. He must be a loony,” Alexis said loud enough that the man probably heard her.

“Are you okay?” CJ helped both girls to their feet. His glasses were crooked on his face and he was shaking bits of bark from his hair still.

“Yea, yea, I’ll be fine,” Claudia sounded rattled.

“Alexis, please promise me one thing,” CJ said as they started to walk out of the park.

“What’s that?” She rubbed a soar cheek.

“Please let me fight my own fights.”

“I’ll try, Ceej. I’ll try.”

Claudia glanced over her shoulder towards the Flannery Manor. Men were moving furniture into the house. For a moment, she thought she saw the crazy man peering at them through a window. She blinked and he was gone. That house was stranger by the day.

## Chapter VII: Midnight Orchids

It was like a song on the radio. The words flowed so smoothly in her mind. It was a man's voice and it was so tranquil, so serene. Her thoughts floated above silver waters while he spoke on, *"Send out inspirations in slumber to the ones I seek. They will see the magic lands when their dreams peak. Show them things that are and things that are to be. Magic protect them from the darkness they may see. Bring them awake if it enters their dreams. Everything will be hazy when the sunlight beams. Sleep, children, sleep."*

The dream was so beautiful. It was like walking into a Monet and having the water lilies at her finger tips. The song echoed in her ears. There was a rippling silver pond that reflected the pink and purple lilies like it was a looking glass. A strange kind of blue frog jumped from one to another. She thought that she could hear its movement in the serene silence of her dream.

Claudia reached out to touch the water but saw something else out of the corner of her eye. A garden grew on the edge of the pond with wild flowers that she had never seen before. There was one flower of the most brilliant midnight blue that stood out amongst the rest. At that instant, dreaming or waking, Claudia knew she had to paint this flower. It was the most magnificent thing she had ever seen. It seemed as if the entire moonlit sky shined through its petals. Thousands of stars were staring back at her.

Through the awe and wonder, another feeling stung at her heart. Sudden panic and dread turned the most peaceful dream to a horrible nightmare. A dark fog started to swirl around her feet in a misty haze. She looked at the reflection in the pond. A towering dark figure began to appear on the water. His scary, cold hand started to stretch out for her. It was like a horrible nightmare written by Tolkien or Rowling.

She wanted to wake up. She couldn't. Her heart started pounding. A voice screamed in her head to wake herself up. Nothing worked. Her legs wouldn't move. She felt paralyzed. Then there was a light, a blinding silver light. It woke her up and pushed her into the waking world. Claudia's lungs gasped for air and she sprung up from her bed. Seeing that it was dawn, Claudia fell back onto her pillow and reminded herself that it was a dream.

“What a way to ruin something so pretty,” She grabbed her ‘dreaming’ notebook out of her side table drawer. Her hand followed the lines of her dream and attempted to recreate the midnight flower that she had seen in her dream. It seemed so hazy and far away that her hand just couldn’t get it right. A frown lined her face in disappointment. Usually, her dreams were easy to remember and recreate. This one was slipping away fast from her memory.

---

“Come on, Danny, don’t tell mom,” Claudia whined at him. Alexis and CJ stared at him with a frown. They were all sitting around their patio telling him about the crazy man they saw that afternoon.

“When was the last time you didn’t squeal on me?” He knew he wasn’t going to tell their parents. Getting his sister all riled up was much more fun. He knew she wasn’t going to say anything to him, but he was nosy and overheard what they were talking about.

“Are you kidding me? How about your tardiness the last two weeks for curfew?” Claudia snapped at him.

“Fair enough. Anyway, you kids stay away from the crazies. Your secret is safe with me. Be careful with Meyers and DeLow, you know they’ll cry to their mommy and daddy and they’ll call Mom for you,” Danny went back inside to get ready for football practice.

“He’s such a,” Claudia loudly sighed, “brat.”

CJ shrugged, “He has his uses.”

“Hey, I had the weirdest dream last night. You guys would appreciate it,” Alexis said out of the blue as she was staring off for most of the morning at the sky.

“So did I, actually,” Claudia agreed with her.

“Yea, me too,” CJ said quietly thinking that was an odd coincidence.

Alexis started to tell them what happened, “I can’t remember most of it. I always feel like I had my head kicked in playing ball when I try to remember the details of a dream. There was this man in some kind of green rob. He was kind of cute in that old

guy sort of way. He had all these stones in his hands. They really were shining in the light. I swear it was something you'd both write a play about.

"He was saying something but I don't remember any of it. The weirdest part is when this guy in a dark cloak stepped in. The place got really hazy and this guy just freaked me out. But the person who saved me from this guy was Danny. Or at least I think he saved me. He showed up and a light woke me up. It was just really strange. Kinda like that dream Danny was telling us about the other day."

CJ stretched on the porch and yawned before grinning, "I didn't see any strange guy in mine. I just had a dream about a beautiful blue haired elfin like girl. She was my own Arwen. Quite nice."

"You get Arwen and I get freaking Saruman. Where's my Aragorn? My dream was something like a painting. Silvery pond, musical voices, and this gorgeous flower I've never seen before. Of course, that was before the creepy guy showed up and ruined it all," Claudia rolled her eyes.

"Weird coincidence. We all had Tolkien type dreams," CJ shrugged his shoulders throwing a conspiracy theory out there for fun.

"You read too many books," Alexis sighed and ran her fingers over the necklace she had found.

"Hey, did you talk to your mom last night?" CJ pointed to the locket.

"No, she ended up getting home really late, and I haven't the nerve yet," Alexis tucked the locket under her shirt. She knew that Mrs. Paradis was good friends with her mother and didn't want anybody accidentally seeing the mystery locket in case they knew what it was.

Claudia leaned back against the house and sighed, "I don't know. I really want to find that flower or something like it. I want to use it for a painting."

"Well, get your camera, and we can go hunting for it," CJ offered.

"Well, as fun as that sounds, I think I'm going to take off for practice. Are you sure you aren't going to go today, Claudia?" Alexis got up and dusted off her soccer shorts. She then pulled her hair back into a pony tail that cascaded down her back.

“I’ll go on Friday. I have to get some art work done for the fair,” Claudia answered feeling a bit bad about not going. Painting was more important than soccer, though.

“Okay, I’ll see you guys later then,” Alexis ran off through their yard and out of sight. Claudia hoped that there were no repercussions for Alexis at soccer practice after their argument with Brett and Shana the prior day. A few of the girls were friends with Shana and had similar attitudes. That was another reason that Claudia didn’t want to go to practice: a potential confrontation. At times, she had to admit her own cowardice.

---

“We have looked at every garden in town. None of them have anything similar to what you want,” CJ threw his hands up in exasperation as they were rounding back near Flannery Park. He was hot and tired from the afternoon sun.

“I know, I’m sorry, CJ. I just am looking for the perfect one. It’s important to me because I can’t really remember it from the dream. The flower was just so beautiful. I just need to find a point of reference before I lose it completely,” Claudia was just as frustrated. The summer afternoon was ridiculously humid and the denim pack on her back was creating beads of sweat that dropped down her skin under her tank top. She stopped and pulled a white bandana from her pack to use to tie up her layers of red hair.

“Can we at least stop in the library to get something to drink?” CJ wiped the sweat from his forehead and then rubbed his arm on his white Beatles t-shirt. The gold rims of his glasses started to slip from his face.

“Yea, no problem,” Claudia threw her bag back onto her shoulder and they continued down the steaming sidewalk looking through the fences at random gardens. The gardens near Flannery Park were some of the most elegant in town, and yet, nothing compared to the sights she saw in her dream. Claudia was almost resigned to having her vision be lost to memories past in her head. The flower was so beautiful that she had to recreate it perfectly. She needed to. It was an obsession now.

“Can we cross the street?” CJ randomly asked as Claudia’s mind wondered in and out of the gardens. She paid no mind to where exactly they were at in reference to the park, in front of Flannery Manor.

“No, I’m looking.”

“I don’t want some loon of a man trying to maim us again,” CJ tugged on her bag wanting to back away from the house.

“Wait,” She hissed at him while peering through the rusting rod iron bars of the Manor. Her fingers around the bars caused flakes of black paint to break off under her skin. She pushed her face as forward as she could through the opening to see the garden next to the house. A shovel and bags of mulch told her that the new owner just planted a new garden here.

“Claudia,” CJ said impatiently. His voice was growing very nervous as he stared at the empty and silent windows. CJ didn’t want to be within a mile of this place and the crazy that lived in it. More importantly, he was worried about what would happen to the both of them if the man came out of his house and recognized them.

“Hold on. Wait,” She kept saying and squinted her eyes to try and focus her gaze, “No, look, CJ.”

She pointed at a blue leaf sticking out from the rest of the garden. “I think that’s it.”

“How do you know? You can hardly see it from here.”

“I just know. CJ, I’ve got to go take a picture of it.”

“Claudia, you’re obsessing over a dream. Do you really have to take a picture of it? If that crazy guy comes out, he’s going to call the cops on us or worse,” CJ was strictly opposed to entering the property but knew his words were falling on deaf ears.

“CJ, stop being such a worry wart. I’m just going to go in really quick to take a picture. It doesn’t even look like he’s home. And why is he going to care if we are just taking a picture? It’s not like we’re looting or vandalizing,” Claudia walked over to the open gate and looked up at the building. She hadn’t really looked to see if there were any signs of the man. It did look like that was no sign of life in the house. Hints of adrenaline and a little bit of fear started to creep up into her mind. She really did just want to get the picture and get out of there. Despite her brave face, the man did scare her, but if she let CJ know that, he would never go with her.

“Okay fine,” CJ followed her through the gate.

### **VIII: Mr. Martin**

They snuck quietly and quickly across the little stone path that led to the garden. CJ peered over and around bushes at the house to make sure nobody was watching them. The flower seemed to push away everything around it to make itself known to Claudia. She knelt down at it and put her back on the dirt ground. Her fingers fumbled the camera clumsily out of her bag due to dread of the man and excitement of the flower. It really did look like a thousand stars at midnight. Here, it was in this amazing garden.

“Quick, take the picture,” CJ was suddenly aware of movement inside of the den of the house.

Claudia seemed to ignore him. As she held the camera in one hand, her fingers reached out to the flower in the other. A picture wasn't good enough. She just wanted to touch it, to feel its texture. Her eyes told her that it would be like no other flower she had ever felt before. Her mind thought that maybe this flower's petals would show her what infinity was like.

CJ grabbed Claudia's arms, “Get your picture.”

“Let go, CJ,” Claudia forced him off but was suddenly filled with panic as the side door to the manor creaked open and slammed close letting loose a mad nest of moths.

The man was quicker than they thought. He came at them in a blur, wearing the same feature hiding cloak, and grabbed Claudia's arm and her bag, “What are you doing here? This is my land!! This is my home! You brat kids!”

“No, no! I'm so sorry, sir. I just wanted a picture of that flower. I swear! I didn't mean to cause any trouble,” Claudia pleaded with him to let go of her arm.

“You kids are all alike. You can't respect anything that's anybody's. You were going to steal it, weren't you? You want what's mine!” He shook her, kept yelling and waving his staff at CJ. CJ took off running yelling for Claudia to follow him.

“No, I swear. I'll leave. I just wanted to see the flower. I had to paint it. I wasn't going to take it. I just wanted to touch it,” Claudia was close to tears. This guy scared her so badly with his featureless face hidden with shadows. It reminded her of the darkness in her dream, the cold, cold darkness.

“You lie! What else of mine have you stolen?!” He pushed her back to the ground and ripped her bag from her shoulder and causing her to drop her camera from her hand and all of her artwork to fall out of her bag. The camera smashed to the ground and caused her to yelp in a start. She reached out to her art work in the dirt like a wounded puppy. The man stopped like he snapped out of a haze. His tirade went silent and he stood motionless.

“My art. You’re going to ruin it. Danny’s camera,” Claudia started to mumble to herself. Her heart started to fill up with a small despair like a child who realized they broke their mother’s perfume bottle. Tears started to well up into her eyes as she started to collect up her things, “I just wanted to paint that flower. I didn’t want anything, just to see it.”

“I’m so sorry, miss,” He said in a quieted hush. His voice sounded calming and wise, unlike the insanity that had proceeded. It also sounded a generation younger, “You tell the truth, I can see.”

“Of course, I do,” She wiped her face leaving a streak of dirt across her cheek; “My parents raised me better than that. We didn’t mean you any harm.”

“Don’t cry. Please, don’t cry,” He seemed genuinely sorry and was very unsure of what to do. His hands started moving in a very flustered pattern. The man knelt down and helped her collect her belongings.

When he pushed the hood down off of his head, Claudia could see that he wasn’t as old as the shadows made him seem. He wasn’t young either. His face was still world worn, with several scars and lines that had a story to tell. Dark, chocolate colored hair was short to his head and messy with the wind. A grizzled beard followed along his strong jaw and over a strong mouth. Yet, all of the emotion that this man was carrying at the moment was in his eyes: his dark endless eyes. They squinted with the light above them and frowned with his apologetic sorrow.

This man was something out of a story, something artists drew to show a pained and worn hero. Despite how he had acted, like an absolute loony, seeing him in such a light erased Claudia’s fears about him away. There was a strange calm around him, an unseen aura.

She wiped her face again with her palms leaving more streaks of dirt. As genuinely as she could, she asked the man again, "Can I please take a picture of the flower? I just want to paint it... and I'll forget what it looks like."

The man said something muffled under his breath that might have sounded like an 'I know.' He collected a few of her sketch books and handed them to her. Stuffing them into her bag, she waited for him to answer but he wasn't saying anything. His face just seemed disoriented or like in a deep thought.

"Claudia! Are you okay?" CJ came back into the garden by moving slow around the house. He thought something bad might have happened to Claudia and was worried because she hadn't followed him.

"Yes, I'm fine," She stifled a smile towards her light haired friend. The concern that CJ had was clear to Claudia since his entire face from his fog eyes to his frowning lips.

"I was just apologizing to your friend," The man said and stood up, dusting off his pants and cloak.

CJ took a double take at what the man was wearing. The brown cloak that stretched to the ground was very similar to that which Claudia had in her possession. It had the same stitching, embroidery and cloth. *He must be into all that stuff Lex's mother was. Was that why he wanted to know where we got it? Why is he so crazy?* CJ thought to himself. Their summer kept getting stranger.

"Fine, let's leave," CJ said sharply looking at the man with narrowed eyes. There was no way CJ wanted to hang around longer than they had to. No apology could change CJ's mind about this man as quickly as Claudia seemed swayed. Quick to forget the raving mad man from the park, CJ felt his priority was to get Claudia out of Flannery Manor.

"I need to take this picture, CJ. This is why I came here," She said just as abrupt and sharp to CJ. Her nerves were no longer rattled and her goal still need to be completed.

"No camera can truly capture the midnight orchid," The man said in a mysterious voice and touched the flowers' petals, "Why don't you come back to paint it? You can bring your friends. Him and the other girl from the park."

Claudia furrowed her eyes a bit and stood up, “I don’t mean to be mean or disrespectful, sir. We hardly know you and on two separate occasions you’ve seemed to try to injure myself and my friends.”

CJ sighed with relief when she seem to come to her senses with the man’s offer. All they needed were to be the next news story about three teenagers gone missing one fine summer day.

The man gave a curt nod in response to Claudia. He spoke almost in an accent that was unfamiliar to both of them. It wasn’t foreign, but it wasn’t American. It was almost British and almost like he was from New England. It was just not of this place and the two kids wondered why they had never heard it before, “You are right to doubt me. I promise you, though; I am not like the man that you have seen on both of those occasions. I have so many treasured possessions and wanted to scare everybody away from my home. This flower is one of them.”

CJ had read enough books in his day to know that this man was hiding something from them. The man’s moods, his mystery, and his talk of treasures gave him all the signs of having a story to tell. Claudia read people well enough to feel the same way, but she didn’t feel threatened like CJ did. There was an immediate trust that she couldn’t explain. CJ trusted very few adults and it took time to build that. This man had not done anything to start building.

“If I can ask you, how did you know of this flower? It is very rare and not many people know of it,” He moved in front of the orchid with his cloak like he was trying to hide it from plain view.

“I dreamt it,” Claudia tried to peer around him. It was like an addiction being taken away when he blocked it from her eye sight.

“Oh, you did?” He was alarmed by this but hid it well with his voice.

“Yea,” She said bluntly. Claudia started to become a little uncomfortable at the questions.

“I am being rude. I am Mr. Martin. I am new to this place,” He put his hand out to shake theirs. His entire demeanor seemed to lighten up.

Claudia accepted his hand shake, “Claudia Paradis. This is CJ Storm.”

Mr. Martin took in their names like they were a clue to the answer of the universe. Their names were like a tool to see if he could trust the children. In his experience knowing a name, knowing where somebody came from, often told about who they were.

CJ reluctantly shook the man's hand but then relaxed his shoulders as if the handshake told him the answer of the universe, as well.

Waving his hand towards the park, Mr. Martin asked, "Who was your friend that was with you yesterday?"

"Oh, that was Alexis Lange," Claudia answered not noticing the way that Mr. Martin thought about Alexis' name as well.

"Who were the people you were arguing with?"

"Just a few punks we know from school," CJ said with disdain, not that he had much say in the argument. Alexis seemed to take the brunt of all argument.

Mr. Martin was really trying to hear more names by asking but by the way these two described the other children, he didn't think they were trustworthy. These three he could believe and he needed help around the house. It was bigger than him. Things were just bigger than him right now.

"Claudia, would you like to come here to paint? And if you both and your other friend would be interested, I truly need help around the Manor cleaning and fixing things up. I will compensate all of you for your time. You seem like good people, and it will give me time to prove that I really am not like the man you've seen so far," He strategically moved away from the flower that Claudia had been trying to see.

"Okay," Claudia didn't have to think too hard about it.

CJ was more hesitant but was afraid she'd get into trouble without him. Strength in numbers right?