

# The Collector

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**This was *not* how I wanted summer vacation to end:** driving with my mom and my sister through cornfields on our way to my grandmother's house. Not for a fun weekend visit, but for good.

I was ready to be bored.

I was ready to be lonely.

But I wasn't ready to face off against an evil power that wanted me dead.



“Do I get my own room?” Anna asked when we drove down Grandma Jeannie’s driveway. “Josie snores.”

I glared at her from the front seat. Sometimes my little sister could be such a pain.

“Yes, Anna,” Mom said. “You both get your own rooms. It’s an upgrade, see?”

“You need internet to get upgrades,” I muttered, crossing my arms. Grandma Jeannie didn’t have any internet service. My phone barely even worked out here.

“Josie . . .” Mom began, but she didn’t finish her

warning. She'd already told me many times not to make a fuss, because this was hard on everyone.

Yeah. Sure.

She didn't have to start sixth grade at a new school in the middle of nowhere.

Grandma's house came into view. It was huge—much bigger than our apartment in Chicago had been. This place had three whole stories, with big windows on each side and a porch that wrapped all the way around. A big yard stretched out on all sides, and past the swing set and small apple orchard was a thick forest that looked like it was filled with brambles and secrets. Even now, on a warm evening, the trees looked dark and cold.

The front door opened and Grandma Jeannie came out. She was shaky and leaned heavily on the screen door, but she was smiling. Even though I really didn't want to be here, seeing her made me smile, too. It was rare to see her smile like she actually saw us.

“Oh, my girls!” she called when we got out of the car. She took a shaky step toward us. “I'm so happy you made it!”

Mom jogged up the steps to hug Grandma while Anna and I got our bags from the back of the car. There weren't many—Mom had shipped a few boxes ahead of us, and the rest of our life was in storage.

“Hi, Grandma Jeannie!” Anna said, running up to hug her. I was right behind.

“Oh, my girls,” Grandma said again. I looked at Mom; her smile looked forced as she watched Grandma. But then Grandma looked back to Mom. “How was the drive, dear?”

“It was fine, Mom. I think we're all a bit tired, though.”

“Well then, I have some sun tea in the kitchen. Why don't we have a drink out here before dinner?”

Mom agreed and went inside to get the tea while Grandma led Anna and me to the patio table.

*She's an old woman, Mom had reminded us a million times on the ride there. Her memory's fading, and she might not always make sense. Just be patient with her and act like you know what she's talking about even if you don't. That way she won't get too flustered.*

“Now, girls,” Grandma Jeannie told us once we

were settled, her voice a strong whisper. “There are three rules for living here. One, never leave your windows open after dark, even if it’s hot. Two, no dolls in the house. And three, never, ever go by the house in the woods. That’s where Beryl lives.”

She looked out to the forest when she said it. I stared, too. It gave me a chill. Anything could be hiding out there. Whenever we’d visited before, she’d never let us out of her sight. But she’d never mentioned a house before. Or Beryl.

Who or what was Beryl?

I wanted to ask, but I didn’t want to upset her. It was clear from her eyes that it upset her enough just to say the name.

“Don’t worry, Grandma,” I assured her, patting her arm. “We’ll follow the rules.”

Mom came out then and handed us the sun tea. I didn’t really want it—I wanted soda—but Grandma Jeannie didn’t have that, so I needed to get used to it now.

Grandma and Mom talked about the drive for a bit. I tuned them out. I was trying to prepare myself for tomorrow, my first day at a new school in a new

town. It made my stomach hurt to think about it. How was I going to find my way around? How would I make friends? What if the kids made fun of me because I wasn't from around here? I'd already stopped worrying about what Grandma had said—her rules were strange, but that was just how things were here. The only thing I could do was follow along.

I only tuned back in when Grandma started talking about Grandpa Tom.

“He'll be right down, you know,” Grandma said. “He'll be so happy to know you're here.”

Mom went quiet. Anna shot me a shocked *Can you believe she said that?* look.

Grandpa Tom had passed away five years ago. I barely remembered him.

“Let's get you inside, Mom,” our mother said. “I think maybe you could use a nap.”

“Tom will be so happy,” Grandma continued. She let Mom help her up and guide her toward the house.

“Girls, could you get the rest of the bags?” Mom asked. I knew she just wanted us to keep busy. She hated seeing Grandma like this.



It seemed to be happening more and more often. That was one reason we were here, to make sure Grandma wasn't in danger. Mom was worried she'd fall down the stairs or hurt herself. And when Mom lost her job, it made sense for us to come here. Or at least it made sense to the adults. It still didn't make sense to me.

All we knew was that Grandma wasn't entirely with us anymore. Some days she was better than others.

And we also knew not to go into the woods.

As soon as Anna and I were a safe distance away, heading to the car while Mom led Grandma inside, Anna asked, "Do you think she's okay?"

I shrugged.

"That was weird about Grandpa, right?"

I shrugged again, wishing she'd get the hint that I didn't want to talk about it.

But she went on. "Who do you think Beryl is?"

"You ask too many questions," I replied. I started lugging the suitcases from the trunk while she grabbed another bag from the back seat.

A breeze blew from the woods, and I heard a noise

that sent another wave of chills down my back. I stopped what I was doing and looked into the trees. Nothing moved.

“What are you looking at?” Anna asked. I nearly jumped out of my skin.

“Did you hear that?” I asked her.

“What?”

I looked away from the woods, back to her.

“Nothing,” I said. “Come on, let’s get these inside.”

I didn’t want to be out there any longer.

That noise . . .

I swore I’d heard an old woman laughing.