

CHAPTER ONE: THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

It was a special day for a young girl named Olivia L. C. Hesselgrove—for it was her tenth birthday. She lived in a big blue house on Continental Avenue in a city called Midtown in Washington State. It was a quaint little town just north of Seattle, with historic ties to the end of the pioneer days. In fact, one of Olivia’s great, great, great grandfathers had been the first mayor of Midtown—but that is a story for another time.

Now Olivia was no ordinary girl, and this was no ordinary house, as she would soon find out.

The house had been passed on from generation to generation, going back to her great, great, great grandfather, James Bercie, who had built it in 1905. He had moved to Washington from a town called Tragedy, New Mexico, just a few years prior, and had met a beautiful young lady named Lillian Willows. Within just a few months of having met and courted—as was the custom in those days—the two were married, and shortly thereafter they had their first child, whom they named Agatha. With a little wood, and some nails and plaster, James had built for his new little family the big blue house on Continental Avenue.

One hundred years later, after six generations, Olivia Hesselgrove was born. The house was now in the hands of her parents, Harold and Hannah Hesselgrove, who had been married for eight years, with Olivia as their only child. “Someday, Olivia,” her father would say, “We’ll pass this house on to you.”

But Olivia didn’t want to inherit the house. Certainly, it was still in pristine condition for a house of its age; and certainly, it had come to be treasured as some sort of family heirloom; but there was one huge problem that Olivia simply could not overlook: the spiders. They were rather large in the eyes of a young girl, and because Olivia was a fearful child,

living in such an old house with its fair share of dark little corners in which spiders could hide was simply out of the question for her. But the spiders weren't the only things Olivia was afraid of. There was also a little family of raccoons that occasionally made their way into her back yard, and she was terrified every time she saw them, with their beady eyes and pointy teeth, and plump bellies, being well fed off the neighborhood garbage.

But the raccoons weren't the only other thing that caused terror to well up within her; there was the rickety ceiling fan in the hallway that spun just a bit too fast, and moss-covered stairs in the backyard that were a tad too slippery. Worse yet were the spots where the hardwood floor creaked when walked upon. Then there was the height of the stairs, the fear of drowning in the deep bathtub, and—on occasion—having to speak to her parents' friends who came over for dinner. But perhaps worst of all was the teasing that came from other children for being afraid—because she was even afraid of that also.

I always feel like this old house is watching me, Olivia thought to herself.

But it was now time to put all her fears aside, for it was time for a birthday party; for it was on this day, this very special day, that she would be turning ten years old. Her mother had spent the previous day preparing an elaborate triple-layer cake with alternating layers of yellow cake with strawberry filling, the top of which was decorated with ten candles, spaced evenly around her name, which was written in large, swirly letters,

“Happy Birthday, Olivia!”

All of her cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and friends came to her party, from both sides of her family. Before it was time for the birthday festivities of cake and presents, the children had gathered together in the back yard to play some outside games; and certainly, none of them could resist climbing up into the tree house—not even Olivia, even though she was dreadfully afraid of heights. One-by-one, her friends and cousins climbed into the tree house; but as soon as they heard Olivia's mother call from the back door that she would be cutting the cake, they scurried down the rope ladder and into the house to get cleaned up. Olivia, however, being too afraid to climb down the rope, and terrified to jump, found herself stuck in the tree house.

Olivia's father, Harold, saw her from the window of the house. He quietly sneaked outside to help her without attracting attention from the other children. "Are you stuck?" he asked, approaching the tree house.

Olivia burst into tears. "I can't jump down, and I—I—I'm too scared to climb!"

Harold sighed with a smile. "Olivia, sometimes in life, you have to learn how to be brave. It takes putting one foot in front of the other, and before you know it, your nickname will be Olivia the Brave!"

"But dad, I can't be brave when I'm this afraid!" she said, sobbing miserably. "If my friends saw me now, they would call me Olivia the Scaredy-Cat!"

"Oh, dear... Well, then here you go," Harold replied, reaching up his arms to an opening on the platform above. "You just have to jump, and I'll catch you."

After a good several minutes of coaxing, Olivia finally jumped—more like fell—into her father's arms. He gave his daughter a firm hug and whispered in her ear, "I'll always think of you as brave, even when you're scared."

Once she made her way inside the house, Olivia was able to dry her tears, and she saw, sitting before her, a familiar face that was able to distract her from everything she had been crying about. It was her grandfather, Stanley, who had come to her party; and Olivia was glad, because Stanley was old, and was not prone to leaving his house, if he could help it. "Grandpa Stan," as he was called by his grandchildren and great-grandchildren, was certainly one of her best friends in the entire world; and even in his old age he was full of fun and excitement. After eating cake, all the children gathered near to hear a story from Stanley—the kind that only one with his wisdom and life could tell. Olivia, her cousins, and a few of her aunts and uncles sat around the aged Stanley as he began to tell them fantastic tales from the days he had spent living in other countries.

After amusing his audience with a few short stories, Stanley declared, "Well, that's all the stories I have for now, kids."

"Grandpa, please—one more?" the children called out. "Just one more story? Please, oh please?"

"Well, I suppose there's time for one more..." Stanley mumbled to himself. "Very well... Here's one last story about a mysterious land, far away at the North Pole, full of strange creatures."

“Oh, this story,” Olivia’s fifteen year old aunt, Autumn, mumbled. “We’ve heard it a thousand times.”

“Autumn, shh! It’s one of my favorites!” Olivia said, hushing her aunt.

Grandpa Stan, meanwhile, cleared his throat, and began to retell his over-told story. “Their story goes something like this,” he said, as he recited a few short little rhymes as follows:

“North Pole, North Pole, where have you been?

“To see the strangest thing you’ve ever seen!

“North Pole, North Pole, jiggy-jig...”

But Stanley stopped here, unable to remember the final line of this short poem.

“Sometimes I dance and dress up like a fig,” Olivia’s cousin Willow added, finishing the rhyme—although that was most certainly not the original ending.

After her grandfather had recited this little rhyme, Olivia felt something strange in the floor under her seat—almost like the beginning of an earthquake. “Did you feel that?” she asked her aunt Autumn, tugging at her sleeve.

“I didn’t feel a thing,” Autumn replied, more annoyed at the sleeve tugging than at the question itself. “Listen to the story, kid!”

Grandpa Stan cleared his throat again, and continued:

“The birds and bees,

they ruled the others;

“The bears and frogs,

they fought like brothers.

“The foxes barked, the mouses harked;

and through the night, they fell to the dark.

“But then, a light,

that shone one day—

“It fought so bravely,

come what may,

*“That through the night,
at break of dawn,
“The battle, then,
at last was won.”*

The children sat silently, captivated by the mystery of the old man’s poem. “But then what happened, grandpa?” her younger cousin Sophia asked.

“I haven’t the foggiest idea!” Stanley replied with a hearty laugh that caused a few tears to come to his wrinkled old eyes. The children all gave little laughs as well.

Olivia’s mother Hannah shrugged at her husband’s aged father. “He’s losing his mind,” she whispered to Harold.

“My dear, he lost his mind a long time ago,” Harold replied with a smile, “but we kind of like him that way.”

Again, Olivia felt a little rumble under her feet. “Really, Autumn, I feel something!” she whispered.

“You’re imagining things.”

“I don’t like this one bit...” Olivia continued. “I feel like this house is always watching me—like maybe it’s haunted or something!”

“Liv, you need to be quiet and listen to the story!” Autumn said in a tone that was no longer quite as hushed as it should have been.

As for Grandpa Stanley, his mind may have been going, but his hearing was as good as it ever was. He stopped, mid sentence, and cast a stern glare in the direction of the two chattering girls, until the eyes of every young guest were fixed steadily upon them. The two girls ceased talking, their faces flushed red with embarrassment, and little Olivia decided to continue listening quietly.

After Stanley had finished captivating the attention of the children with his stories, the time arrived for Olivia to open her presents—and there certainly were dozens of them. She tore through the wrapping paper with haste, expressing a quick thank-you after each gift she opened. Her final present, given to her by her parents, was in the form of a sealed envelope.

I wonder what this could be...! Olivia thought to herself. She unsealed and carefully opened the envelope, her eyes growing wide with a sense of wonder as she drew out a single sheet

of paper, upon which was printed in formal writing an invitation to attend Shady Grove dance camp. “Dance camp!” Olivia shouted aloud with joy.

“Yes,” her mother said. “It’s for five days at Shady Grove dance camp. They’re having a special focus on ballet that week!” Olivia was excited to be able to go to camp this year. Shady Grove was the best dance camps within fifty miles of Midtown, far exceeding the others in prestige and performance. This particular camp event was an all girls session for ages ten and up, and Olivia had wanted to attend ever since her last birthday; but camp was still a few weeks away, and she certainly needed the time to prepare for it.

Slowly but surely, the party came to an end, and whether or not they had brought gifts, Olivia was certain to give kind regards to all the aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, and friends who had attended. Her parents, who generally preferred quiet time with a good book to loud festivities, were relieved that the party had finally concluded, and that everything had gone smoothly without so much as a hiccup.

Being an only child, Olivia had grown skilled in the art of playing by herself, with all her imaginary friends; at dance camp, however, she would have plenty of real friends to play with. She looked forward to her time at Shady Grove, and the growing excitement made the next couple of weeks seem to crawl by at a snail’s pace, until the day finally came for Olivia to go to camp. Her mother had helped pack her bags, and her father had piled them neatly on the kitchen table.

During the five days when Olivia would be at dance camp, Harold and Hannah had planned to go hundreds of miles away to Portland, Oregon, on a vacation of their own. The couple would be attending a science fair, where brilliant minds from around the world would meet up and try to solve the world’s problems. And rather than leaving the house empty for the week, Hannah had asked her mother Constance and her younger sister Autumn to stay there in the family’s absence. Given that Constance was quite busy with work, this left care of the house to Autumn.

“Do you think they’ll be okay?” Hannah asked, worried.

“It’s only a week,” Harold assured her. “Not even a week, actually. Five days. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“It’s not like she’ll burn the house down,” Hannah added, trying her best not to be worried.

“And even if she does, hey—we have fire insurance!”

“Harold! That’s not funny!”

Now Harold and Hannah both liked to be on time, and the convention would be no exception. “Where’s Autumn?” he impatiently asked Hannah, as he began to pace up and down the hall. “We have to leave now if we want to be there on time—any later than this, and we’ll get stuck in Seattle traffic. And then, even worse—Tacoma traffic!”

Just at that moment, the family could hear the familiar sound of a car engine coming to idle on the street outside the living room window as Constance’s boxy purple SUV pulled up to the Hesselgrove residence.

Harold looked at his phone to check the time, then motioned Hannah toward the door. “We can’t stay a moment longer.”

“We have to at least say goodbye,” Hannah said as she opened the door to her family. She then proceeded to give a brief lecture about safety, after which she and her husband got into their two door hatchback and embarked on their journey to the Washington-Oregon border, in the vain hope of avoiding Seattle’s horrendous traffic.

Olivia was glad to see her grandma Constance, who, though proud to bear the title “grandma,” simply looked too young to actually be a grandmother. Olivia was also glad to see her aunt Autumn, who was perhaps the closest thing to a sister she ever had. Grandma Constance had said she would drive Olivia to camp, but as Olivia would soon find out, there’s nothing like an emergency phone call from an employer to cause an unexpected change in plans.

After hanging up her phone, Constance gave Olivia and Autumn quick hugs and told them both in a hurried tone, “Something big’s come up at the office. I have to make a quick trip, but I should be back shortly.”

Neither Olivia nor Autumn were entirely certain who Constance’s employer actually was, just that they could be very demanding at the most inopportune times. Having lived through her mother’s hectic career her entire life, Autumn had grown accustomed to last-minute plan changes; so she asked her mom, “What should we do if you’re not back in time to get the kid to camp?”

Constance knew Olivia would be heartbroken if she had to miss camp. “If I’m not back in an hour, then call your sister Ruby,” she said to Autumn, walking out the front door. “She can take Olivia to camp. Do you need anything while I’m out?”

“No, Mom,” Autumn replied, preemptively reaching for her phone to call Ruby.

“Okay. Love you, girls!” Constance shouted as she shut the door behind her; and a few moments later, her car was nowhere to be seen.