

Come Find Me

“What were you doing in the basement last night?” The mother asked her over breakfast, each word like a tiptoe into a minefield.

“What? What are you even talking about?” Mallory glared back past a limp curtain of dark hair, almost surprised at the sharpening edge she noticed building in her tone each time she addressed the woman who bore her. The mother’s thin lips pinched together, but she didn’t raise her eyes from the bowl of stale bran flakes before her.

“Well, I heard you stomping down there again last night, and I’m just saying that you should stop. The stairs are old and steep. It’s not safe.”

“Oh, right,” Mallory spat the sarcasm-drenched words at her. “You’re definitely a mother that is so worried about safety.” The dagger hit its mark, and the mother stood up from the table so abruptly the chair legs screeched against the worn wooden floor. The bowl made a hollow clatter as it was tossed into the sink. She heard a snuffle escape from behind the mother’s turned back. Mallory almost felt bad.

The truth was, Mallory *had* been in the basement last night. She just had no recollection of how she had gotten there. Her night had been filled with unsettling dreams of being summoned, the suggestion of a cold hand encircling her wrist and tugging. But that part was almost certainly a dream. The reality was that she’d been waking up in the basement for the past two nights. In the pitch dark. Standing in that cold, dank space. The space she intentionally avoided. She shivered there alone, and yet not alone. The dead stillness pierced by the sound of her own panicked gasps, and perhaps someone else’s breath as well. Both times she had scurried back up to bed and tried to forget. Just as she had forgotten so many things.

It hadn’t always been just Mallory and the mother. There had been a father, and a sister. Oh, her precious little sister Aurea, so sweet and perfect and golden. Aurea had golden hair. Hair that trailed behind her as she frolicked, and haloed into a shimmering cloud around her little face when she jumped on the trampoline in the backyard. Both sisters had been born with those glorious golden locks, but only the youngest had retained them. Mallory’s hair had slowly darkened, starting from the scalp as if dull and ugly weeds were taking over and pushing out that blonde botanical wonder. She remembered her father shaking his head and saying it was a

shame. She didn't even know what that word meant at the time. But she was sure whatever shame was, that it was hers.

Her father left after Aurea disappeared. One day she was there, bouncing on the trampoline in her white dress and golden ambience, and the next she was gone. There had been search parties, flyers with her smiling face stapled to telephone poles. Everyone assumed some weirdo had taken her. She was, after all, in the backyard by herself. Mallory knew this because she had seen it from the window. Aurea looked happy, she assured her parents afterward. They had stared at her, and Mallory wondered if that wasn't the right thing to say. She kept waiting for the father to take her on his lap, and twirl her around like he used to do with Aurea. But he didn't, and eventually his sadness over the loss of his golden girl had driven him away.

Now it was just she and the mother left. They lived in a white farmhouse with a small plaque that read "c.1861" next to the front door. Her parents had loved the "vintage character." Mallory mostly groaned over the creaky floorboards and the strange smells in certain corners. The house did have a fair share of hiding places, though, which granted a certain appeal. Hours of hide and seek were enjoyed. "Come find me!" Aurea would squeal to Mallory, who usually complied. Mostly for the discovered nooks and crannies the house allowed her to find along the way. An extra closet behind a bureau in the guest bedroom. An entire hidden room in the basement below the addition. The old stone well. Mallory wondered what other secrets would be revealed to her if she lived in the house alone. If the mother was gone.

That night she slid into bed, and told herself she wouldn't wake up in the basement again. Clearly just a silly fluke. It had been years since that other thing happened, and it was all in the past. "That was then and this is now", she whispered up to her ceiling. She wondered if the mother suspected anything. If her unwanted trips to the basement would dredge up any questions. She shook off her frown and shrugged. The past could always repeat, she thought and giggled. It had worked so nicely before. Mallory closed her eyes, and snuggled into the comfort of her warm blankets. She opened her eyes, and she was standing in the basement.

Her bare toes felt numb on the dry packed earth, as if she had been rooted in the spot for hours. Goosebumps covered her exposed skin. This hidden room had no cement on the floor, just dirt so dark it was nearly black, compressed by thousands of steps pounding it down over a century and a half. The silence was so complete, her gasp of surprise resounded like a roar. A

sliver of light seeped through the crack in the door behind her, illuminating the circular cover in the center of the room. The wooden door that covered the ancient stone well.

Mallory had discovered the hidden room with the well years ago. She had kept it to herself. That was, until she had shared it with Aurea. She turned to leave the room and scramble back to the safety of her bed. But behind her she heard the creak of a rusty hinge. She turned to watch in horror as the well cover inched open on its own. A shadow on the edge, *could those be fingers?* She shook her head. *I'm dreaming*, she pleaded. She closed her eyes, willing herself to wake up and put this terrible nightmare behind her. The scuffling of little feet echoed around her. She opened her eyes and the well gaped open before her, waiting.

She forced herself forward to close it. It could not be left open. It held too many secrets. Then, Mallory heard it. A tiny peal of laughter, echoey and distant from down below. When she was within arm's reach to close the door, she planted her feet but somehow didn't stop moving. Some uncontrollable urge compelled her to approach the edge. "Come find me," a whispery voice tickled her ears. With increasing panic, she fought against limbs that seemed no longer hers as they moved forward on their own. She didn't want to look, but found herself leaning over the edge to peer down into the well. She winced at the smell and could make out the faintest outline of small bones at the bottom, surrounding a white dress. Then two small hands pushed on her back, just as she had done many years ago, and down, down, down she fell.

As she plummeted down, her eyes were drawn upwards by a hazy glow. A small face, translucent and resplendent with golden hair, grimaced at her over the edge. "Found you first," it whispered. Mallory's cry for help was cut short by a terminal bang of wood on stone.