

The Mystery of the Blue Moon

The House on Carver Street

Yesterday, on his way home from school, Ash Merrill spotted a small hole in a high fence covered with ivy, and when he had peeked through it, he had seen a hand. Not the hand of a person, but the hand of a statue. Always a taste for adventure, he wanted to go through that fence that belonged to the last lot on Carver Street, and investigate the premises of the estate.

Today, during their first break, he had told his friends Thom and Phineas about it. At first Thom wasn't very keen about coming with him, but, reluctantly, he had given in, and now the three boys were hiding behind a car, making sure no one saw them. Ash could see Thom was a little on edge. 'What's wrong with him?' he asked Phin. 'He's never this nervous.' But Phin only shrugged.

Just as Ash started to get up, Thom grabbed his arm. 'You shouldn't go over there, Ash! Your mom would kill you!'

Ash looked at him. 'Yeah, she already tried last night when I asked her about the house.' This wasn't true. In fact, she had just told him to stay away, because it was private property and he had no business there. It was what she was supposed to say as a mother, but knowing she shared his taste for adventure Ash knew she would probably be as excited as he was if she had been with him instead of Thom and Phin.

Ignoring Thom's warning, Ash got up and walked up to the hole in the fence. He could see an old house. Not decayed, but old like it was from the previous century. Actually, from what he could see through that tiny hole, it looked a little like The White House. The statue turned out to be a fountain. He couldn't see the whole thing, but he saw what looked like a basin and he could see that hand he saw yesterday, a stream of water coming out of it. He couldn't see more than the chubby little arm it belonged to, but Ash thought the statue must be that of a child. The rest of the fountain was blocked by huge trees and their overhanging branches.

Ash wanted to check it out but just as he wanted to grab the fence's latch he felt Thom's hand on his shoulder, turning him around. 'My gran told me that house is not safe, that the person who lives there isn't normal!' Ash looked at him. Thom was always the courageous one, the one with the loudest mouth. Now, he seemed almost scared. Ash didn't tell him this, because he knew Thom would feel offended if he did. Phineas, didn't say a

thing, but just shrugged again. Where Thom was loud, Phin was always quiet, didn't say anything he didn't have to say.

Ash took another look at the house, getting more and more excited by everything Thom was saying. Then he turned back to Thom, grabbing him by his arm. 'Not normal? How? Is he a prisoner? Or a psycho? And you actually knew there was a house hidden behind this fence? Here in our little town? Why didn't you ever tell me?'

Thom tried to cut loose from Ash's grip. After a few moments Ash let him go. Thom straightened his jacket and then just stood there, staring at Ash. He had a concerned look on his face, which for a moment worried Ash. 'Thom? What does your gran mean with "not normal"?' Thom put his head next to Ash's and whispered, 'She says it's haunted.' Ash snorted unbelievably. 'Haunted? Are you kidding me? How does she know? Did she..'. Thom interrupted him and pulled him away from the house. 'Don't talk out loud, maybe he'll hear you!'

Thom let go of Ash's arm and grabbed his bike. 'Suit yourself! Don't say I didn't warn you! I'll see you tomorrow, Ash.' And he raced out of there so fast that he had almost seemed to have disappeared into thin air. Phineas following behind Thom in a more leisurely pace.

Ash stood there, alone for a moment. He took another look at the house and the fountain. Not everything was visible from where he stood and Ash felt a rush go through him. He wanted to see more. He wanted to pull down the latch and walk through those tall trees in that enormous garden. If the neighbors hadn't been this enthusiastic with the trimming he never would've spotted it in the first place. He felt excitement and a feeling of anticipation. A reward for waiting this long for an adventure to happen.

From a very early age Ash Merrill had always wanted adventure, excitement. The stories his mother read to him about Tom Sawyer and Peter Pan fascinated him beyond anything. 'But why can't I have such adventures, Mom?' he had asked. And his mother had replied, 'Because we don't live in that kind of world, Ash, it's all make-believe. These stories never really happened. They were made up by people with great imaginations. And these people wanted to put their stories in books so that people who want adventure, but can't have them, can read these stories and have an adventure that way.'

This didn't make sense to Ash. Having an adventure would be so much more exciting than just reading about them. And so Ash, now eleven, had always tried to find adventure with his friend Thom, and later on with Phineas, when he had moved to their town.

The house was big and white, with four huge pillars in the front. It stood to the back of the lot and it was completely surrounded by high walls covered with vines of ivy, which made it impossible for anyone to see the house. No wonder he had never seen it, Ash thought. There was a large driveway leading up to the

front door. He could picture how horses with carriages had pulled up here to bring rich guests to parties that were held there, a long time ago.

'Can I help you?' The voice belonged to a woman. Ash turned around and tried to say something but no more than a stammer came out of his mouth. Besides feeling a little caught, she had disturbed his moment. He gave up his attempt at speech and instead scowled at her. Finally, he managed to talk. 'I have never seen that house, I was curious.'

The woman looked through the gap. 'The owner is very private. We never see him and we live next door to him.' Ash eyed her carefully. 'Is he a businessman? Does he work at home?'

'I'm afraid I don't know. When we bought this house, we went over there to introduce ourselves. When he opened the door he didn't even invite us in. He told us how very nice it was that the house was sold to such a nice couple. But then he said that he valued his privacy and that he worked a lot and very hard. That was our cue to go, I guess. I have never seen him since, actually.' She turned to leave for her front door. Ash followed her. 'How come that house is so big? It seems out of place here.'

'That house has been here for more than two hundred years, our houses were built later. If you want to know about it I suggest you go to the library. A house that old must have a history. Could be quite exciting, don't you agree? Well...bye!' She waved and disappeared through her front door.

Ash sighed. How was he going to get in? Maybe he should go to the library first, like the lady suggested, find out about it some more before trying to get in. And maybe someone at the library knew who the owner of the house was. As he walked home he thought about Thom. Not about what he said but how he had said it. The words he had whispered came out trembling, and when Ash had looked at him in disbelief he saw that Thom was genuinely scared, he was even a little jittery when he walked to his bike. But Thom was also known for his gullibility and his grandmother must have known that too.

When he got home he asked his mother, Gwen, if she knew who was living in the big house. She had only looked at him at first and then said, 'If you're looking for adventure, Ash, why don't you ask if you can move in with your father in the big city, I'm sure you can find excitement there every day.'

His parents were divorced and his mother was still bitter about it sometimes.

'Mom, I don't want to live in a big city, I'm not looking for that kind of adventure! Why do you think I don't want to live here?' He dropped his schoolbag at the foot of the stairs and sat down at the kitchen table. His mother looked at him with a knowing smile. 'I know you're bored, Ash, I know that you are looking for something other than this. But, this isn't the movies.'

'I don't need help finding adventure, Mom, because I know I won't find it!' He stood up and grabbed his bag. For a

moment he hesitated to go up, then said, 'It doesn't exist here.'

He walked up the stairs to his room hearing his mother hollering after him. 'Don't go trespassing on that property, Ash Merrill! If the police show up, I won't acknowledge you!' Gwen wasn't sure if Ash took it as a joke. She sighed and turned to her frozen dinners.

The next day, Ash walked over to Phineas. Ash liked his quietness. He was a nice balance for Thom who had the habit of yapping away every time he had a chance.

'Hey, Phin!' Phineas turned around and nodded, his gesture to show he had heard Ash. Ash took him by his sleeve and pulled him out of earshot. 'About yesterday, I found out this business man lives there and...'

Phineas interrupted him. 'Look, don't get me wrong, but Thom's story that the house is haunted is more interesting than yours probably is, Ash.' Ash was silent for a moment. He was surprised by the many words that Phin had spoken and, simultaneously, was hurt by his second best friend who had turned him down. Didn't he even want to take a look?

'Sorry, man.' Phineas said. He gave Ash a friendly pat on his shoulder, as if to say, "no hard feelings, all right?" He turned around and went inside to their classroom.

For the rest of the school day Ash didn't say anything to either Thom or Phineas. There was a new kid in town and today was his first day. He seemed to draw all the attention and Ash didn't mind a bit. Normally, Ash would have found a kid from out of town exciting, but his discovery of the house seemed so much more exciting and interesting than the newcomer.

He was counting down the minutes and when finally the last bell rang he grabbed his bag and ran out of the classroom straight outside to his bike. He heard Thom yelling after him, but he didn't listen. If his friends didn't want to share his adventures, fine. He was going to do this one on his own, starting at the library.

'There is no listing for a particular house in our computer system.' Mrs Hale, the librarian was eyeing him over her reading glasses. 'Doesn't the estate have a name?'

Ash shrugged, 'I don't know, I thought that you would know more about this town than I'd do, ma'am.'

Mrs Hale, looked slightly annoyed at this remark but said nothing. 'I suggest you take a look at the local history section, something might be mentioned in one of the books about our town. First floor, red section, numbers 404 to 423.' She went back to her work without saying another word. Ash thanked her.

He didn't mean to be rude to her. He just thought that a librarian might know something about the town. It wasn't wrong to think that, right?

He found four books on their town, one of them that seemed to go at least a few centuries back. On his way out he

walked by the librarian. 'Mrs Hale?' She looked at him without saying anything. 'I just wanted to thank you. I found what I was looking for.' He held out the bag with books to her and grinned. Her eyes softened at that and sighed. 'You're quite welcome, young man.' Maybe this kid still knew what a book was, she might have thought.

At home he sat down at the table and started leafing through the pages rapidly. He didn't see anything about the house so he decided to go to the index, but there was nothing on Carver Street. He put the book aside and grabbed one of the other ones, going straight to the index this time.

His mother came in. 'Ash, can we talk about what you said yesterday? I thought about it, but what did you mean by "It doesn't exist here?"' Ash's mind was preoccupied by his books, not the talk he had with his mother last night. However, when he saw her worried look, he put the book away. 'Mom, by "not here" I didn't mean Richmond, or even New York or anywhere else on this planet. I meant adventure like in books and movies; other worlds.'

His mother looked concerned. He knew where this was heading. 'Don't look at me like I'm losing my mind because I'm not. Sometimes I just get really bummed that in real life I will never have such adventures. That I'll always have to read a book or watch a movie to get it. Yesterday I had this great adventure in mind and Thom just dumped me, and this morning Phin dumped me, and I just can't understand why they don't want to come with me! So, I decided to go for it myself. It's nothing like the movies, Mom, I promise, just let me have the tiniest speck of adventure that I can get. Please?'

His mother smiled and grabbed his hand. 'Okay', was all she said. Ash put the book in front of him again. 'Looks like this will turn out into nothing anyway, because I can't even find Carver Street in these books. I mean, that house is, what, two hundred years old? How come there is nothing in these books?'

His mother took the book Ash was looking at. 'Why are you so interested in that house all of a sudden?' She leafed through the pages as Ash had done but with a lot more patience.

Ash didn't answer her right away. He didn't know why he wanted to know about the house and its occupant, so he simply said, 'I don't know. I never saw it before and yesterday when I did see it, it was like it pulled me toward it. I talked to the lady living next to the estate and she told me that she only saw the owner once when they introduced themselves to him and that he didn't want to get acquainted with them because he was too busy with work. She suggested I'd go the library and here I am with what I could find.'

His mother folded her hands under her chin and smiled endearingly. 'To think that you had problems...'

Ash was confused. 'You mean mental? I'm not going nuts, Mom, I already told you!'

'Yes, now that you have told me, I'm not worried

anymore. Ash, I don't know what's going on inside your mind. You hardly said a word to me. What was I supposed to think?' Ash knew she was right, but he hadn't done it on purpose. 'Well, will you let me do this?' He saw his mother going through the index. 'Sure, maybe I can be of help to you, because I happen to know that that house was the first house ever built in our town. I even think it was built by the founder. And Carver Street wasn't Carver Street until the nineteen forties.'

He looked at her. 'How do you know that? What is Carver anyway?'

'Carver was a "who", Ash. He was an African-American doctor named George Washington Carver. I know he received an award of the Thomas Edison Foundation for his work. Probably some other awards, too, but I don't remember what the street was called before that. So, I hoped I would come across something familiar in the index, but I can't find it either. Maybe I never knew the original name. I think you need to return to the library tomorrow. See if you can find a book or a document on the history of the street names of our town? Maybe there's something about the house in one of those. Or, a more specific book on the foundation of Twin Oaks?'

Ash looked at his watch and seeing he still had time, grabbed his jacket and rushed for the door. His mother ran after him. 'You're going now?' Dinner is almost ready!'

'I'll be back in ten minutes!', he called back over his shoulder as he drove his bike down the street.

'You're back already?' Mrs Hale looked surprised. 'If it is homework, why don't you kids start earlier?' Ash had to catch his breath. 'It's not homework. I'm investigating something. Could you take a look in the system if there is a book on street names or the founder of this town? Or a document?'

Mrs Hale raised her eyebrows. 'It should be in the same section as the other books you took. And if you can't find anything there, maybe there is something on street names in general? As for town documents, they're not allowed to be taken home, you have to look through them here, but we'll be closing in about five minutes, so you'll have to come back tomorrow for those.'

She tapped on her keyboard. 'Ah, yes, there is a book in the local history section called "Street Names of West-Virginia", number 388.'

He thanked Mrs. Hale and returned to the local history section.

He ran his finger past all the titles, but he couldn't find the book with number 388. Someone must already have taken it. Disappointed he walked back to the exit. On his way out he passed Mrs. Hale's desk but she wasn't there anymore. Maybe there was something in the books he already had at home, after all. He just had to be more patient and go through them more thoroughly. He had almost reached the exit when he heard someone calling. 'Young man! Young man, stop! I have the book

here!"

It was Mrs. Hale. She came trotting up behind him waving a book above her head. 'I have it here, it was on a cart with books that just came in today. Lucky for you I still had to put them away before closing time!' Ash felt like he could hug her but that would have looked weird. Nevertheless he thanked her heartily and ran out the door before the library closed for the day.

'I got something! It's about the history of street names!' he yelled when he got home. The table was set and Gwen was carrying their plates as he came running into the kitchen. 'That's great! But shouldn't we eat first?'

Ash hung his jacket in the hall and came back all sweaty. He was actually pretty hungry. Why don't we eat and look at the book at the same time. If that's okay with you.' He could see that his mother was as curious as he was. 'Of course, it is. Come on!' and they both sat down.

Ash laid the book in front of them so they could both look at it. They had to tilt their heads a little but that was no bother for Ash. They opened it and looked up the name of their town. Gwen leafed through the pages patiently. The street names were listed alphabetically.

Ash sighed and took a bite of his potato. 'There's nothing under "C"!'

Gwen went on to "G". 'Patience, Ash, here it is; George Washington Carver Street. Page 208.'

Ash frantically searched for the page that would hopefully give him some answers. Ash saw his mother reading the text but as much as he wanted to know about this street he was too impatient to actually take his time for it. He wished he could somehow inhale the information from the page. He was looking at the ancient drawings and pictures of how it all used to look. Suddenly his mother spoke, 'Hm, looks like it was called Maribelle Street when they founded this town. That's really a prettier name for it than Carver, as much as I respect what doctor Carver did in his life. Don't you think?'

Ash turned the page and there he saw a drawing of the house. It looked just the same as it did now, except the trees weren't as high as they were now and there was no wall like the one that surrounded the estate these days.

'Look,' Gwen said, 'They named the street after the house. It's called Maribelle. Oh, that's such a pretty fountain.' She pointed at a separate black and white picture of the big fountain which Ash had seen only in part in the front garden. He hadn't been able to see it in its entirety when he had peeked through the gap in the hedges. Not yet, anyway, he thought to himself, because he promised himself he would get there, and soon.

The fountain was a round basin of marble and in the middle was a figure of a woman in what looked like a tunic, like the greek statues that were in his history book. She was holding her arms in the air and in her hands she was holding a ball.

Around the woman there were four figures of what seemed to be children. One of them held out his hands as if reaching out to the beholder and from these hands water flowed into the basin, another child showed the onlooker a small ball. He couldn't see the other children in the picture, but no doubt they were holding something in their hands as well.

'It says here that the house was built in 1707 by a wealthy industrialist and it has stayed in the family ever since. Well, there's your answer; it's private property.'

Ash let out a long sigh. 'Yeah, but we already knew that. Does it say the name of this industrialist? What is an industrialist anyway?'

'An industrialist is someone who owns a lot of factories. And, no, it doesn't say his name.' His mother closed the book. 'Do you want dessert?' Ash felt a little disoriented. His mind had already been trailing back to the house, to Maribelle. Was it the name of the builder's wife? Was the industrialist one of the founding members of the town, like his mother thought? Why hadn't he heard of the family until now? Maybe the son or daughter was going to his school? Or did wealthy children get private lessons? He had so many questions and the main question was simply; Why? Why did all this interest him so much? There wasn't really anything interesting about the whole matter yet. But that could all change, he thought.

Last year he went to see "Jurassic Park" with his friends and they had come home excited, but Ash was the only one who had started to go the library and grab as many books he could find on dinosaurs and prehistory. He had to see it first, like a story, before he could be interested in a subject. Maybe his history teacher had once mentioned the name of the town's founder but at the time it all seemed so boring.

Finally, his mother's words came through to him. 'Huh? No, I'll skip dessert. I want to read more about this.'

He grabbed the book off the table and started for his room. But his mother stopped him. 'No, you don't. You go and do your homework first. When you're finished you can go on researching.' She took the book back from him.

He wanted to protest but he knew he wouldn't win this from his mother. He went up the stairs without the book.

The Journal

When he came down the next morning his mother was already making him breakfast.

He hadn't slept well. He had dreamed of houses and their owners who looked like they were from a few centuries back. He remembered he had stepped into Maribelle's fountain barefoot and that Thom was shouting from a distance that "it was haunted". The new kid had been there, but when Ash had looked closer he saw that it was Phineas. Phineas with his hands in his pockets and his everlasting silence. And there had been something about a jewel, but he couldn't quite place it. There had been more but these were the images he could remember. There wouldn't be more images, he thought. By this afternoon the whole dream would probably be forgotten, as dreams were prone to do.

'Slept well?' his mother asked. And without waiting for an answer she went on making breakfast.

'I have been looking in those other books you brought home yesterday, and I found a name that belonged to the owner's family. "Bowen". This family also founded the town, as I suspected. Does that name somehow ring a bell? History lesson, maybe?'

Ash, instantly awake and his dream indeed forgotten, rushed toward the table where he saw the book lying open. There were no pictures but the chapter was called "Maribelle Estate". Ash read the text. The estate had been built by an industrialist called Bowen, who after a lot of traveling around the world bought the land and built his house. After him, a lot of people followed in his footsteps, thus founding this town. Houses were built around his estate and over the years most of them had been torn down and rebuilt. Now, the house was in the South-East of town.

Ash reread the little chapter again. His mother had put a plate next to him. 'Eat! Or you'll be sorry! I've also packed your lunch.' She put it in his schoolbag. 'Ash, I'm off. The bakery has reopened and I want to see if they've improved it. At least they kept their name, now let's see if the bread is better than that of the supermarket.' His mother looked at Ash who didn't seem to hear her. She smiled and grabbed her coat and shopping bag. 'Make sure you pay more attention to your teacher than you do to me, honey!' And she was off.

On his way to school Ash saw a huge line forming outside the bakery. His mother was in the middle of the line. He slowed down and rode his bike next to her. 'Hey! The reopening is today?' His mother frowned at him. 'As I've just told you, yes. I hope the bread tastes the same as before.' she repeated. 'All the customers get a present! I'll get some rolls okay?' Ash was lost in thought again. Then he asked, 'How long has this bakery been here?' A plan was forming in Ash's mind.

'Well, old man Daly started his business in the thirties, if I remember correctly and his son Phil has taken over.' Gwen told him while rummaging through her purse.

In fact, Charles Daly had opened his bakery on March 21st 1934, Spring day and ever since then it had been called "Your Daly Bread". Charles had worked in several places before deciding to start a bakery. In 1974, at the age of 67, Charles had retired and his son Philip had taken over with his wife.

Today, Charles, a widower for the last six years, lived in a home for elderly people. And Ash happened to know that this home for the elderly was called St. Ambrosius and that he would be paying a visit to old man Daly later today. Because Mr. Daly must have talked to a lot of people during his time running the bakery. And people who talk a lot to other people know a lot about what's going on in a small town.

Gwen reminded him of the time and with only a few minutes left he hurried to school.

Out of breath he arrived just in time. He had just parked his bike when the bell chimed the beginning of another slow day. Thom came walking next to him, but Ash didn't say anything.

'Hey, Ash, have you met the new kid, yet? His name is Matt West, he's from out of town. From the big city. Boy, he must really going to hate it here, huh? I mean, what kind of parents move from a big city to the country.'

Ash stopped in front of the classroom. He looked at Thom. 'Have you talked to him? Did he actually say he didn't like it here?'

Thom shrugged, 'No, I haven't had the chance to talk to him yet. Everybody is really interested, though! It's just that he seems to be a bit bored, you know?'. Ash was getting agitated. Sarcastically he said, 'Yeah, I know. Nothing ever happens around here, and when you do find out something interesting, no one wants to know about it.'

They walked into the classroom and took their places. Ash took out his books. Thom sat next to him. 'Are you mad about me not wanting to go with you to that spook house? Ash, next time you're on to something I'll be there, man, but I gotta pass on this one. Sorry, bud!' Ash let his shoulders hang. Thom sounded more like himself again today. But now that he thought about it, he didn't really want anyone to help him finding out more about Maribelle.

'It's okay,Thom. Anyway, it turned out to be nothing. A businessman owns the house and he's hardly ever there because of

all the traveling he does.'

Thom looked relieved. 'How did you find out? You actually went in there?'

'No, I asked at the house next to the estate. The woman who lives there was outside, gardening. She has met the owner once two years ago when they moved into the house. He said he was very private, so they backed off.'

'So it's not haunted?' Thom asked, genuinely puzzled. This made Ash laugh out loud. 'You're an idiot, Thom! Why don't you ask the owner yourself? I even have a name for you, it's..' But Ash was cut off by his teacher. 'Okay, everybody, take out your're geography books and turn to chapter eight!'

The day turned out all right to Ash's relief. Thom and Phin had acted normally again and he was glad that they did. They were okay. He had been friends with Thom since kindergarten and they had been on the swimming team together. Their mothers had become acquainted so Ash and Thom had done the same. Phineas had moved to town four years ago. From the first day on he had just joined Ash and Thom at their lunch breaks and they had accepted him just like he had been there for years. They went to the movies together and sometimes they were allowed to go to the local toyshop to look at the new arrivals of G.I. Joe's and Action Man's. The toyshop was a thing of the past now, although sometimes they would check it out for the latest Gameboy games.

At half past three, when school was finished, Ash said goodbye to Thom and Phineas and jumped on his bike. On his way back he saw the new kid, Matt West, walking to what Ash thought must be his new home. He pulled over next to Matt. 'Hi,' said Ash, 'You're in my class, right?'

Matt kept on walking with his schoolbag tugged under his arm and his hands in his jeans pocket. 'I guess I am.' Regardless of this kid's attitude Ash thought it still fascinating to have someone from the city living here. Maybe he would like to hang out with him and Thom and Phin. 'Hey, if you want you could come with me and my friends to the movies some time?' Matt turned the corner without looking at Ash. 'Sure, whatever.'

Well, I tried, Ash thought. He turned his bike around and made his way to St. Ambrosius, the home for the elderly.

When he walked into St. Ambrosius's hall he saw a group of elderly people sitting together. Some of them were sitting on regular chairs but others had special wheelchairs. There was one lady who even had an I.V. standing next to her. He walked up to the check-in counter but there was no one to be seen. No bell he could ring to let anyone know that someone needed help. There wasn't even a note or a sign that said "will be back at four". He was looking around the hall to see if he could find a nurse, when the woman with the I.V. waved to him and beckoned him to come to her. Ash looked around the hall again, as if talking to the old people was forbidden. Some of them might have amnesia, he

thought, but then decided it probably couldn't do any harm.

He walked up to the group of people. He saw the woman smiling at him. Ash was a little uncertain of what to say, so he just asked what he came here for.

'Hi, do any of you know where I could find Mr. Charles Daly?' It was silent for a moment and Ash felt himself go red in the face. He fidgeted with the zipper of his jacket. 'I can't find a nurse and the reception lady isn't at her desk.' He pointed to the counter but when he looked at it he saw that now there was someone.

He started for the counter and wanted to apologize to the people, but the woman with the I.V. started talking.

'Charles is in the recreation room with Ray and Archie.' She pointed to her left. 'Just walk down that hallway there and to your right you'll see the recreation room. You won't miss it, the walls are of glass. You'll see him as you walk by. Tell him Myrtle told you where to find him.' She kept smiling at Ash. Ash looked in the direction of the hallway she had pointed to. Then he looked at her.

'You are Myrtle?' Myrtle only nodded once. She kept staring at him which made Ash even more nervous. 'Thank you, eh..Myrtle! I'll tell him!' He waved and started for the hallway.

He saw Myrtle was right; he couldn't have missed the recreation room even if he had wanted to. He saw three men sitting at a table playing cards. Two other residents were at another table playing backgammon. A nurse was carrying a plate with small cups on it. She was giving them their daily medicine. Or, hourly, Ash thought. He knew his grandfather had to take sixteen different pills each day at certain hours when he was still alive.

Ash mustered up some courage and politely knocked on the open door.

Six pairs of eyes looked at him. The nurse spoke first. 'Can I help you, young man?' She gave him a stern look, peering over her glasses.

'Uhm, would it be all right if I talked to Mr. Daly? If that's all right with him, of course.' Two of the three men playing cards looked at the third one, telling him which one of them was Charles.

He gave a pleading look to Charles Daly. 'Myrtle is back there in the hall and she told me I could find you here?'

Charles Daly didn't say anything to him. The man next to him put down his deck of cards and sighed. 'Come on, Charlie, talk to the kid! He just wants to ask you something, ain't that right?' He looked toward Ash. 'This is Charles and I am Ray Bridgewood and this is Archie Trask.' He waved Ash over to the table where they were sitting. Archie spoke. 'My name is actually Archibald.' And looking at Ray he continued, 'And I wish you would call me that instead of Archie?' Ray rolled his eyes a little too deliberately for all of them to see. Sure, whatever you say, Archie.' And he gave Ash a wink.

Ash smiled at Ray. He was a little more comfortable, so he turned to Charles.

'Mr Daly, I was wondering if you could tell me something of this town's history? Especially, the Maribelle house on Carver Street. I noticed it the day before yesterday when I was coming home from school. The neighbors trimmed their hedges and it became visible for only a small part, but I could see it nonetheless. It's a very beautiful house. Nothing like the rest of the houses on that street. Or anywhere else in town, actually.' Ash blurted out the words as if he had wanted to say them for a very long time, but Charles kept silent.

Ray looked at Ash apologetically. 'I'm sorry, son, if I knew anything about our history I would tell you but I don't know a thing about it. You see, I moved here four years ago. I'm from way up north and Archie here moved here from the big city after his daughter couldn't take care of him anymore. You see, her husband left her with three kids. She had to move to a smaller house and there was just no more room for Archie.'

Archie looked at Ray with tin lips and a very stern look. 'Thank you, Raymond, for clearing that up to the boy, not that he needs that kind of information.'

He made a snorting sound and looked at his cards again, as if the deck had changed when he hadn't been looking. Ray turned his attention back to Ash. 'What's your name, young man?' Ash extended his hand across the table to Ray and Archie. 'I'm Ash Merrill.' He held out his hand to Charles as well.

'How do you do, Mr. Daly? I saw this morning that your son has reopened the bakery. My mom was in line and she told me you started this business in the thirties? That's why I thought of you to ask about the history of Twin Oaks.'

Charles still didn't say a word, but he shook his hand. Ray looked hopefully at Ash and winked again. When Ash wanted to ask Charles again about the house Charles spoke. 'I can't tell you anything, boy, I can't even remember two weeks ago, let alone seventy years ago! Now, let us get back to our game, please, it's almost dinnertime and we want to be finished by then, don't we, men?'

Ash got up from the chair. He felt a sinking sensation of defeat and hopelessness. Charles was one of his best chances of finding out anything about Maribelle. Why wouldn't he want to tell him anything? Charles didn't strike him as forgetful at all. His eyes looked very lucid and keen. 'Mr.Daly? Maybe, if you wouldn't mind, I could come back on Saturday. This way you can try to remember something from those days. I mean, it can't all be gone, can it?'

Charles' reaction was totally unexpected. He threw his cards on the table and stood up with some difficulty. 'Look here, kid, I told you there is nothing to tell. Now, go and get your ass out of this building and leave me alone!'

Charles had turned red in his face. Ray stood up as well, and helped Charles sit back down again. Ash, taken aback by

Charles' outburst, hurried to the door and as he walked into the hallway he heard Ray telling Charles he had to calm himself down or it would be the death of him. 'Someday that temper of yours is going to kill you, you hear? Not a failing heart or cancer, but your temper! Mind my words, Charles!'

When he came back in the main hall he wanted to see if Myrtle was still there but she and the rest of the people were gone. The nurses must've gotten them back to their rooms for dinner, Ash thought. He felt frustrated, but not entirely without hope. When he thought to see Myrtle just now, he realized he could ask her about the town. And maybe the people who were with her could tell him something. Charles Daly wasn't the only old person in this town. He could ask lots of people! He decided he would go back on Saturday, even though that meant Charles was not going to be the one to help him.

When he got home his mother was on the phone and from the sound of her voice Ash concluded it was probably his father. Robert Merrill had left Gwen when Ash was seven. He had not only left her, but he had run away with another woman. His mother had explained to him that that could happen between mothers and fathers. And that she wasn't the first and wouldn't be the last, either. He had remembered that she had cried a lot in that time, and the only thing he could do for her was sit with her. She would grab him and hug him and although he felt awkward whenever she did that he hugged her back, because it seemed the only thing he could do. Ash himself had not been that sad and in the beginning it worried him. He had asked his mother if he should be more sad but she had said not to worry about it. The time would come when he would greatly miss his father. Maybe in a year, maybe in ten years. In school he learned that indeed a lot of kids had parents who were divorced. So he had taken it as just another fact of life.

A few months after the divorce Ash had found some torn pictures in the wastebasket in the study. He expected them to be of his father but instead he saw they were of his mother and her friend Maddy. He thought that was really weird because his mom and Maddy had been friends since they went to school together. He had taken the shreds to his mom and had asked her about it. She had just taken the shreds from his hands and had thrown them in the garbage can outside their house. When she had come back in she had only said, 'Madeleine has been very mean to me, Ash. And it hurts so much I can't ever talk to her again.' Well, Ash had thought, every one who makes my mother hurt so much must be very mean, and so he had never talked about Maddy again.

He hung up his jacket and stood very close to the door. It was open just a crack and he put his ear to the opening. His mother was on the verge of tears, he could hear it in her voice. But she tried to keep it all in. She doesn't want to give in, Ash thought.

'Robert, who do you think you are? You really think that I would help you out now that she has left you? I've never asked

you for anything, I have respected your decision, I lost my only good friend to you and now you ask me for money?' There was a silence, then, 'Oh, sorry, of course, and you want to see Ash. Well, that's up to Ash, isn't it! ... No, he's not home yet... I will, but if you don't hear anything from him don't be surprised!' And she slammed down the phone.

Ash walked back to the front door, quietly opened it and shut it again with a bang. 'Mom, I'm home! Sorry, I'm late, I have been talking to Charles Daly over at St. Ambrosius.'

He came in the living room and his mother was sitting on the couch. She was breathing rapidly and looked flushed.

'Are you all right?' he asked and sat down next to her.

'Sure, I just ran down the stairs really fast to get to the phone in time only to find out it was some salesman trying to get me into buying some sort of miracle vacuum cleaner. I got a little mad because he kept hassling me about it.' She looked at Ash a little embarrassed. 'I told him to shove it up his ass.' Ash laughed heartily along with his mother, but he knew she was a good liar, especially when it came to covering up conversations with his father. She never seemed to want him to overhear her talking to him. He decided to let it be and tell her about Mr. Daly.

'Don't you think it's weird?' Ash asked his mother when he had told her what had happened that afternoon. 'I mean, what's so difficult about telling a little about our town history? He poked in his mashed potatoes. Normally, it was one of his favorite meals, but he had barely eaten any of it. His mother thought about it. 'I think you should give him some time to think it over. Go back in a few days, like you said. Who knows, maybe he'll give in when he sees you're serious about this. Ash took a spoonful. Gwen had told him exactly the right thing and now he actually became hungry and started to wolf it all down. In spite of his upbringing he went on talking, with his mouth full.

'You know, I think I'll go back on Saturday. He might be expecting me then, because I suggested it to him. If he doesn't want to talk then I'm going to talk to this old lady that was sitting in the hall. She told me where I could find Old Man Daly in the first place. And she was sitting with a lot of other old people. There must be someone who knows something, right?'

His mother looked disgusted and she scowled at him. 'I'm in no need to see those potatoes get mashed again, Ash. Please close your mouth! It looks revolting!' And then in a more gentle tone, 'Do you know who this lady is? Is she, you know, clear-headed? Not senile, I mean?'

Ash had thought about that. 'She looked okay, and she talked okay. And anyway, you once told me that senile people often remember things from their past. Since that's all I need I think I'll give it a go.'

His mother smiled at him. She got up and started to collect the plates. 'I'm going to put them in the dishwasher tonight, I don't feel like cleaning up.'

To Ash it felt as if Saturday would never come. It had only been two days but it felt more like two weeks. For the first time the hours seemed to crawl in stead of fly. On the long awaited morning Ash came down the stairs and grabbed a roll from the plate that his mother had put on the table. 'Mom, I'm going straight away to St. Ambrosius, 'kay?'

His mother looked at him with a gasp. 'It's barely nine, you can't barge in there this early!' Impatiently, Ash asked, 'This early? It's not that early, on weekdays everybody has already gone to school or work!'

'Young people and middle aged people, yes, but not the elderly, Ash. Use your wits. Most of them need help getting up. Nurses are probably fewer than patients. Do the math.' Ash sighed, and sat down at the table. His mother laughed. 'I've never seen you this impatient before. Will you promise me if Old Man Daly does not want to talk to you, you will not bother him any further? No is no, you will thank him and go on your way. Find that Myrtle woman if you want.'

"Myrtle woman?" Mom, don't be cruel, she was nice.'

He got up and walked to the hall to get his jacket. 'I'm gonna go anyway, I'll wait in the hall.' On his way out he called over his shoulder, 'I'll give Myrtle your best wishes!'

His mother stuck out her tongue to him and went back to her book she was reading before Ash came down.

As Ash walked into St. Ambrosius he saw to his surprise that Myrtle was already sitting in the same spot as she was two days ago. But now she didn't look as frisk as she had then. Ash walked up to her and greeted her. 'Good morning, Myrtle!'. Myrtle looked up at him and gave him a very thin smile. 'Good morning, Ash. You came back.' It wasn't a question.

Ash frowned at her. 'How do you know my name?' He was certain he hadn't introduced himself to her.

Myrtle cast down her eyes. She was holding some sort of leather bound book. It seemed very old. Then she said, 'I know who you are, Ash, because I knew your grandparents. When we were young we used to be friends. Your grandfather, I used to call him Willy, your grandmother Mary and Charles and me were good friends, we used to play together as children. Mary was Charles' sister.'

Understanding dawned in Ash's mind. He knew that his grandmother had had a brother whom she didn't speak to anymore. They'd had some sort of fight, but he had never learned the truth about it. And as far as he knew his mother didn't know either. Maybe even his father didn't know. He certainly had never talked to him about it.

'So, Charles is my great uncle?' This was a whole new turn of events. 'I know my grandma didn't talk to her brother, but I have never known why. I never asked. I think I kind of took it as a natural thing. People have fights. Like my parents; they got

divorced when I was seven.'

Myrtle's sympathetic smile told him that maybe she knew about that, too. 'Didn't your father ever tell you why they didn't speak?', she asked. Ash shook his head. 'We never talk about it, actually. I think maybe he thought I was too young to understand. Or maybe he doesn't know either.'

'Perhaps.' Myrtle said as she turned the book over in her hands. She sighed and then looked at Ash. 'You came back to talk to him again, I take it?'

Ash sat down in the chair opposite her. 'Well, I just have a few questions about the history of this town, about that house Maribelle to be exact, and I figured...well, my mom said maybe I could ask him because he's been in this town all his life and he owned "Your Daly Bread" for a long time. He must've had a lot of customers in the bakery, so maybe he can tell me something. Anything!'

Myrtle held up her hand to him. 'Ash, before you go on you should know something. Charles died last night.'

Ash felt the hairs on his arms and neck rise up. He said, 'What? How?', and then a terrible thought came to him. 'Did me coming to see him have anything to do with it? Did he have heart attack?'

Myrtle put the book down on the table. 'No, he didn't. He had a very hairy heart, Ash, and a few weeks ago he started going downhill. His heart simply gave in to the battle and it stopped. He didn't even feel it, he was asleep in his bed when it happened.'

Ash felt a sadness in him he hadn't expected. First he learned that Charles is family, and then, out of the blue this old strange lady tells him he had died. He hadn't cried in a long time, but now he felt tears welling up in his eyes. He fought them back as best as he could, he didn't want Myrtle to see him crying. She would try to comfort him and that would only make it worse.

When he thought he had himself under control he managed to say, 'I'm sorry he died. Was he still your friend?'

'Yes, at least I'd like to think so. He turned an old sourpuss a long time ago, but he couldn't hurt a fly, that man!' Her eyes got back the twinkle that Ash had seen last Thursday. Then she picked up the book she had been holding when he came in. 'I guess he knew he was going to die; he told me to give you this.' And she reached out the book to Ash. 'It's his journal, and I believe it's also his great-grandfather's journal. When we were kids he told us he found it with his grandfather's things in the attic and I remember him reading from it to us kids.'

Ash took the journal and somehow his sadness was replaced by that wonderful feeling of excitement again. He felt a little guilty as well, but it was the feeling he experienced when he first saw a glimpse of Maribelle.

The dark brown leather journal was stained with old age. A string of the same leather was bound around it to keep it closed. On the front was a some sort of dark blue jewel, held in place by a round piece of leather, like a frame holds a painting. Ash let his

fingers touch it. When Myrtle spoke he jumped; he had almost forgotten she was still sitting with him.

'It's a lapis lazuli jewel, as far as I can tell. It's very pretty, isn't it? I have a bracelet with a lapis.' She leaned closer to Ash and whispered, 'Got it from a foreigner.' She was blushing while she said this without paying attention to Ash. Ash didn't notice. He was entranced by the journal. He wanted to go home as soon as possible, to read it, so he got up. 'Myrtle, thank you very much for giving me this. Do you know when the funeral is?'

Myrtle's eyes were far away but when Ash mentioned the funeral she snapped back it seemed. 'Oh, yes, the funeral. I think Phil still has to decide. He's very busy, you know, with the reopening of the bakery. He wasn't really prepared for this, I imagine. Why don't you write down your phone number and I'll have the nurses call you?'

Ash wrote down his number on a magazine and tore the piece of paper off. 'Should I give this to the nurse myself? Maybe..' Myrtle reached out for the piece of paper. 'I'll give it to her, I haven't the slightest idea where that hussy is at the moment.' Ash was hesitant. Then he gave it to her. 'You're sure you won't forget to give it to her?'

'Ash Merrill, I may be old but I'm nowhere near senile!' She laughed then and put the piece of paper inside her bra. 'If I forget anyway, then the nurse will find it tonight when they change me into my pj's!' And she started laughing again. After first going red in the face while discovering Myrtle's secret hiding place, he joined her happy moment. It was almost unbelievable how she could still be so joyful after losing a friend. Not just a friend, either. A friend she had known all her long life.

'Well, I'll be going now, I guess I'll see you at the funeral?' Ash made his way to the exit and looked back to see if Myrtle was still there. Of course, she's still there, Ash thought, who did she have to take her back to her room other than the nurse who was probably too busy. He thought about going back to her and offer her to bring her to her room, but just then, the nurse came. Ash smiled and waved and Myrtle, still smiling as well, returned the gesture.

At home his mother was waiting for him. She had a very worried look on her face and Ash could tell that she had heard about Charles as well.

'Hey, mom.' he said. She looked at the journal in his hand. Now her look became puzzled as if she wasn't sure whether or not they had been talking about the same Charles Daly. Ash eased her mind. 'It's okay, Mom. I already know. Myrtle told me he passed away in his sleep. He had a very bad heart, and apparently he got worse over the last few weeks.'

News like this wasn't hard to miss in this town; she probably heard while doing her shopping at the bakery. If it had opened at all today, Ash thought. She sat down and made a gesture for him to do the same.

'Sit down, Ash, there's more to tell.' She pulled out a chair for him to sit on. 'You know Emma, right? She asked me if I had already informed Robert about this and naturally I asked her why.'

Ash knew what was coming. His mother hadn't known Charles was his grandmother's brother either. He let her finish her side of the story. Maybe Emma, who wasn't as old as Charles or Myrtle, but certainly a woman in her fifties, knew more about the fight between Charles and Grandma.

'It turns out that Charles Daly was your father's uncle. He was the brother your grandma never talked about. Ash, Charles Daly is family and I thought maybe you'd like to go to the funeral?'

Ash put down the journal. 'Myrtle has told me about that too, Mom, and I told her I'd see her at the funeral. She promised to make the nurse call me as soon as they know when it is.'

There was a silence. Then Ash asked, 'Has Emma told you anything about what Grandma and Charles were fighting about?' His mother shrugged. 'No, she didn't, I didn't think it was an appropriate moment. Robert has never told me about this either. I'll bet you anything he doesn't even know.' She fell silent for a moment, focusing on her shoes. Then she looked up at Ash.

'About your father Ash, I think we should call him, don't you think?' She didn't wait for an answer. It was quite obvious she didn't feel like calling the one person she least wanted to talk to, but she went to the phone anyway, dialed the number which she still knew by heart, Ash noticed, and waited.

Ash didn't really care if his father came, or not. At the moment he only wanted to read the journal. He picked it up from the table, unbound the leather string and opened it. On the first page was written:

Tobias Daleigh 1830

A rush went through Ash's body again. This journal was more than a hundred and fifty years old. He heard his mother in the background talking on the phone. Ash didn't even hear it. He only cared for what was written in the journal. "Daleigh", Ash whispered. So "Daleigh" had become "Daly" over the years. He liked Daleigh better. It sounded old fashioned and more sophisticated.

He was still deciding whether he should go on reading now, or that he would wait until he was upstairs and alone where Gwen wouldn't interrupt him by talking about his father, but she made the choice for him. She came into the kitchen with a very surprised look on her face.

She sat down next to Ash and after what seemed for quite a while she said, 'He's not coming. He knew about Old Man Daly being his uncle, but he says he doesn't want to go to the funeral of the man who hurt his mother.'

Ash asked the only question he wanted to know. 'Does he know why they didn't talk? It must have been something terrible; it happened when they were still young, right? And now Dad holds a grudge against Charles and he doesn't even know him.'

'I know,' Gwen said. 'This could go on forever without someone bothering to do anything about it. Next thing you know, it's a family feud and a hundred years from now no one will know what happened. I asked him if he knew, but he said it isn't important enough for us to know.'

'A hundred years?' Ash exclaimed. 'If Dad doesn't tell us we'll never know!'

They were quiet for a moment. Ash didn't really mind his father wasn't coming. He would only make his mother upset and for one short visit that just wasn't worth it. He just cared more for his mother.

'Are you okay with him not coming?' Ash asked carefully.

His mother sat upright and faced him. 'Actually, I am! And for the first time in a long while I feel good about it! His loss, right?'

She says she feels good, and she looks good, too, Ash thought. He was happy when his mother was happy.

Then she said, 'At the funeral there will be a lot of people and I'm going to find out what this fight was about, Ash! We have to be prepared for anything. Your grandmother was a nice person, but maybe it was all her fault! Who knows what kind of dark family secret has yet to be uncovered! Kind of exciting, don't you think?'

She winked and then she gave Ash a hug. He realized it felt good and, hugging her back, Ash didn't mind he could share this adventure with her instead of with his friends. When she had let him go he picked up the journal.

'Look at this, Mom, Charles left it for me. It's his great grandfather's, or something, anyway it's from 1830 and written by someone called Tobias Daleigh.

His mother took it and opened it. She flipped carefully through the pages. When she came to the back she said, 'Looks like Old Man Daly also wrote in this book.' She closed it and sat there thinking for a while. 'Why would he give this to you? You would think he would give something as valuable as this to his son.'

Ash took the journal from her. 'Maybe it's nothing Phil needs to know.' He thought his mother's remark was weird and he felt a bit agitated. Wasn't it obvious? 'I asked Charles about Maribelle in particular. Why would he give this to me if he didn't think there was something important for me to find. I think there is.' He regretted his tone when he looked at her. 'I didn't mean it to sound that way. Sorry, Mom.'

'It's okay, I understand. It's just that Charles never saw you in his life. Two days ago he yells at you for bothering him and now he's dead and he leaves you his great grandfather's journal?'

It's not that obvious, Ash.'

'That's why I know there is something particular about the house in the journal! Maybe Tobias knew the Bowen family. Look, I just want to read this. Is it okay if I go upstairs?'

She made a gesture toward the garden and said theatrically, 'Maybe you can sit outside? It's such nice weather, it would be a waste not to go outside.' She smiled and looked at him sideways. Ash looked at her, raising one eyebrow. If he wanted to go out he'd go out, she knew that. This was just a way of trying to look in on the journal while he was reading.

Well, Mom, I think I would be too distracted sitting here in this nice weather. I think I'll go upstairs to my room.' And he turned towards the stairs.

He didn't have to look at her to know that she was making a face at him. He smiled and then turned around. Gwen was still standing there looking at him with a smile on her face.

'Yes, Mom, you can read the journal, too. After I'm finished.'

Gwen clapped her hands in excitement and made for the kitchen when Ash made a final note. 'But I'm not going to rush this. I want to enjoy this, okay? Maybe I'll be finished in two weeks, or so?' And without waiting for an answer he went to his room. Gwen slumped her shoulders.

He didn't waste a second, not even for a drink or a snack. He plunged into his reading chair (a gentle present from his father), snuggled up and opened the journal and started reading aloud:

I am 15 years old and my grandmother thought this would make an appropriate present for me. I was not all that delighted at first, but something very exciting has happened to me and as I am to keep it a secret from my family, especially from my parents, I have decided to entrust my story to this handsome leather book. I will not bother with random and uneventful occurrences as my sister will probably do. Yes, she got one, too. But I shall venture with this one story:

I have been wanting a working position to earn some money for myself, but my father will not hear any of it. We are by no means poor, but he wishes for me to go to college and my free time must therefore be devoted to studying. As I am not a half-wit I do not need all my spare time poring over books. I would like to gain some experience in one of the factories or on farms. Last year, when we moved here from England, my father was hired

by a very rich man to act as overseer in his iron factory. Mr Bowen owns several factories throughout the country and as it is impossible for him to be present in all of them he took overseers into employment to run his factories. He lives in a house on Maribelle Street, the same name as his estate, as it was named after it.

I asked my father if perhaps I could come to the factory some time and observe him in his daily functions, but alas, he was not in favour of my idea..

Then, earlier today, as I was running an errand for Mother, I happened on a man who was the carriage driver for Mr. Bowen. The wheel of the carriage had given way and the good man was waiting for someone to come and repair it for him. I offered my help but as he had already sent for it I decided to stay and keep him company. I asked him if he knew Mr Bowen well. Mr Kingsley, the driver, told me that Mr. Bowen was a very generous and kind man and the best employer a man could ask for. I then told him about my aspirations for an employment but that Father thinks it wise to concentrate on my studies instead.

'Your father sounds like a wise man, my boy!' he said. 'As much as I appreciate my employment with Mr. Bowen I cannot help to regret the way my life has turned out for me. I come from a rather poor family, and good schooling was difficult to get, but had I put my mind to it I could have gotten at least an education. Mainly, I read a lot of books about all kinds subjects, and so I educated myself, but that would not have aided me in getting a better employment.'

Mr Kingsley's words made me understand Father a bit better, but I was not convinced so easily. 'But, surely, there must be an employment which will not be so time consuming?' I said to him. 'What about an errand boy? I do errands now, for Mother. Father does not mind me doing that.'

Mr. Kingsley pointed ahead and my heart gave a jolt just then for there was Mr. Bowen himself, riding towards us on a horse. My nervousness got the better of me and I only managed a bow. Then I ran away. By the time I arrived at my house I felt foolish and silly for acting like a child. How could I ever face Mr. Bowen again?