

Theo of Golden

Where Lost Things Go

Soren Vale

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE	1
THE BOY WHO WENT INTO THE RIVER	1
CHAPTER 1	9
THE SHOP ON ALDER STREET	9
PART 1 — THE EMPTY STOREFRONT.....	9
PART 2 — THE SIGN IN THE WINDOW	13
PART 3 — THE FIRST OBJECT	18
PART 4 — COFFEE AND QUESTIONS	21
PART 5 — THE MAN INSIDE THE SHOP.....	25
CHAPTER 2	31
THINGS LEFT BEHIND	31
PART 1 — BLUE INK	31
PART 2 — THE WIDOW’S WATCH.....	36
PART 3 — WHAT THE WATCH KEPT	39
PART 4 — NO PRICES	43
PART 5 — THE RECEIPT.....	47
CHAPTER 3	53
THE SHAPE OF CERTAIN GRIEF	53
PART 1 — REVEREND PIKE.....	53
PART 2 — THE FUNERAL NOTICE	58
PART 3 — MERCY IN PUBLIC.....	64
PART 4 — THE ARCHIVE ROOM.....	71
PART 5 — BLUE PENCIL	78
CHAPTER 4	85
PORTRAITS WITH SCRATCHED FACES	85
PART 1 — THE SHOES.....	85
PART 2 — THE BOY IN THE PHOTOGRAPH.....	89
PART 3 — MERCER SHIPPING.....	93
PART 4 — THE SHAPE OF A TRAP	98
PART 5 — RAIN AFTER MIDNIGHT	103

CHAPTER 5	109
THE WEIGHT OF SMALL OBJECTS	109
PART 1 — THE MISSING LEDGER	109
PART 2 — MERCY DINER WATCHES	115
PART 3 — THE WOMAN WITH THE CASSETTE RECORDER.....	120
PART 4 — THE MESSAGE UNDER THE MESSAGE	125
PART 5 — THE FIRST NAME.....	130
CHAPTER 6	136
SMOKE OVER THE RIVER	136
PART 1 — AFTER THE NAME	136
PART 2 — THE BURN BARREL	138
PART 3 — CALEB DUNLEAVY’S LOCKER	140
PART 4 — THE MAN IN THE TRUCK	142
PART 5 — SMOKE IN THEO’S ROOM.....	144
CHAPTER 7	146
INVENTORY NUMBER SEVENTY-THREE	146
PART 1 — THE TAPE.....	146
PART 2 — JONAH’S VOICE.....	148
PART 3 — INVENTORY NUMBER SEVENTY-THREE.....	151
PART 4 — MARY BELL	153
PART 5 — THE VISITOR.....	156
CHAPTER 8	158
WHAT FIRE REFUSED TO KEEP	158
PART 1 — DEPUTY COLLINS	158
PART 2 — ELI’S FIRST LETTER.....	160
PART 3 — THE BURNED RECORDS.....	162
PART 4 — THE NAME COLLINS WON’T SAY	165
PART 5 — FIREPROOF.....	167
CHAPTER 9	170
FLOODWATER	170
PART 1 — THE FURNACE ROOM	170
PART 2 — WATER RISING	171
PART 3 — THE BURN SCAR.....	173

PART 4 — THE FACE IN THE CORNER	175
PART 5 — THE RIVERBANK	177
CHAPTER 10	179
MERCY DINER AFTER MIDNIGHT	179
PART 1 — THE RIVER GIVES BACK.....	179
PART 2 — THE CROWD AT THE BANK	180
PART 3 — THE BRACELET	182
PART 4 — AFTER MIDNIGHT AT MERCY DINER.....	184
PART 5 — THE MISSING SIXTH BOY	185
CHAPTER 11	188
THE MISSING LINES.....	188
PART 1 — THE GIRL IN THE PHOTOGRAPH.....	188
PART 2 — THE ARCHIVE REOPENED	189
PART 3 — THE NAME REMOVED	191
PART 4 — DORIS REMEMBERS	193
PART 5 — THE SECOND LETTER.....	195
CHAPTER 12	197
THE THINGS THAT SURFACED	197
PART 1 — LENA ROWE	197
PART 2 — THE HOLDING ROOM.....	198
PART 3 — THE ESCAPE	200
PART 4 — WHAT RAY CHOSE.....	202
PART 5 — THE KNOCK BEFORE DAWN.....	204
CHAPTER 13	206
INVENTORY NUMBER SEVENTY-THREE	206
PART 1 — LENA ALIVE	206
PART 2 — THE PHOTOGRAPH OPENED	208
PART 3 — THE SIXTH FIGURE	209
PART 4 — THE PRICE OF SILENCE.....	211
PART 5 — MORNING COMES TO GOLDEN	212
CHAPTER 14	215
WHAT THEY BURIED	215

PART 1 — THE REPORT	215
PART 2 — MERCY DINER BREAKS	217
PART 3 — THEO AND COLLINS.....	219
PART 4 — MARY BELL’S DECISION	221
PART 5 — THE LAST LETTER.....	222
CHAPTER 15	225
WHERE LOST THINGS GO	225
PART 1 — RIVERSIDE PARK	225
PART 2 — THE HIDDEN COPY.....	226
PART 3 — THE LAST ATTEMPT	228
PART 4 — THE TOWN WATCHES	229
PART 5 — WHERE LOST THINGS GO.....	231
EPILOGUE	233
THE RIVER KEEPS ITS OWN TIME.....	233

Prologue

The Boy Who Went Into the River

By midnight, the river had swallowed the heat but not the smell.

Golden's dockyards always smelled alive after dark.

Wet rope. Catfish rot. Diesel. Mud stirred from the river bottom.

Rain trapped inside warped wood planks from storms years old.

The smell clung to everything.

To clothes.

To skin.

To memory.

The boy ran anyway.

His sneakers slapped against the loading dock hard enough to echo beneath the corrugated metal roofs overhead. He nearly slipped turning the corner beside a stack of blue shipping barrels, caught himself against splintered wood, then kept moving.

Sixteen years old.

Too thin.

Breathing through his mouth because the left side of his nose had started bleeding again.

He pressed one hand against his ribs as he ran. Not from injury. From the thing hidden beneath his shirt.

It bounced against his chest with every step.

Behind him, somewhere deeper in the dockyards, metal clanged.

Then a voice.

“Dammit—”

Another voice cut across it.

“He went this way.”

The boy flinched hard enough to lose his footing for half a second.

He knew those voices.

That was the worst part.

Not strangers.

Not criminals from television.

Not drifters passing through.

Men from Golden.

Men with church jackets.

Men who shook hands at football games.

Men who stood beside grieving families at funerals with solemn faces and casseroles.

The boy vaulted over a rusted chain lying across the dock and ducked between two storage containers, squeezing sideways through the narrow gap. The metal scraped his shoulders.

His lungs burned.

He could still see it.

Ten minutes earlier.

Maybe less.

Time had started folding strangely since then.

The river behind Mercer Shipping had looked black under the floodlights. Thick and slow-moving. Like oil.

He had gone there because of the shouting.

That was all.

He had been cutting behind the warehouses after sneaking cigarettes from his mother's kitchen drawer. He wasn't supposed to be near the docks that late. Everybody knew that. But summer in Golden made houses unbearable after dark. Walls sweated. Air conditioners rattled uselessly.

So he wandered.

Then heard men arguing near the water.

One voice furious.

One pleading.

Then the sound—

A crack.

Not a gunshot.

Something heavier.

Closer.

More human.

The boy slowed now, stumbling toward the edge of Dock Four.

His chest tightened as the memory replayed again.

A man collapsing against the concrete.

One of the others grabbing him before he hit the ground.

Blood running into the rainwater grooves.

And then the sentence that had frozen the boy where he stood behind the pallets.

“Nobody can know he was here tonight.”

After that came silence.

Not shocked silence.

Working silence.

Decision-making silence.

The kind adults used when terrible things became practical.

The boy swallowed hard.

The thing beneath his shirt felt heavier now.

He ducked suddenly as flashlight beams cut across the dock behind him.

“Over there!”

The boy bolted again.

His breath tore raggedly through his throat.

The river widened ahead, moonlight trembling across black water.

Boats knocked softly against their moorings.

A storm was coming.

He could smell it in the wind.

Thunder muttered somewhere far beyond town.

“Eli!”

The boy froze for one disastrous second.

That voice.

Not angry now.

Almost desperate.

“Eli, listen to me.”

Closer than before.

He turned halfway.

Three figures moved between the floodlights behind him, their shapes breaking apart in the fog drifting off the river.

One carried a flashlight.

One carried something long tucked against his leg.

The third man walked slower than the others.

Older.

The boy knew all three.

His stomach folded inward.

“You don’t understand what you saw,” the older man called.

Eli backed away toward the water.

“I saw enough.”

“You need to calm down.”

“You killed him.”

“That is not what happened.”

The older man sounded insulted by the accusation. That frightened Eli more than yelling would have.

The flashlight beam found his face.

He threw up an arm against the brightness.

“Give us the ledger,” one of the men snapped.

Eli's hand instinctively pressed against his chest.

So they knew he took it.

Of course they knew.

He should've dropped it somewhere.

Should've thrown it into the river.

Should've kept running toward town instead of the docks.

But some stubborn animal instinct had rooted itself inside him the moment he grabbed it from the ground near the body.

Because men did not panic over nothing.

And grown men did not chase children through dockyards unless the thing inside that leather book mattered.

"Eli," the older man said again, softer now. "Nobody wants you hurt."

"That man's dead."

The older man didn't answer immediately.

That pause said everything.

A tugboat horn moaned somewhere upriver.

The storm wind picked up harder, carrying river mist through the dock lights.

Then—

Movement.

Small.

Quick.

Eli glanced sideways.

A child stood near the stacked crab crates twenty feet away.

A little boy.

Maybe eight years old.

Barefoot.

Thin.

Watching silently from the shadows.

Eli recognized him vaguely.

One of the Bell kids.

The quiet one.

The boy stared at Eli with huge frightened eyes.

The men behind him hadn't noticed.

Eli looked back toward the approaching flashlight beams.

Then at the child again.

Something inside him decided.

Fast.

Permanent.

He pulled the leather ledger from beneath his shirt.

Dark red cover.

River water smeared along the spine.

The child's eyes widened.

Eli crouched low behind a pallet stack and held the book out.

The little boy hesitated.

"Take it," Eli whispered.

The child didn't move.

"Take it," Eli said harder.

The flashlight beams swept closer.

The child darted forward finally, snatching the ledger against his chest.

"Hide it," Eli whispered.

"What is it?"

Eli shook his head.

"No matter what happens, you hide it."

Footsteps thundered closer.

The child vanished instantly between the crates.

Gone so completely it was like the dock itself had swallowed him.

“Eli!”

The boy stood again.

Too late now.

The river wind lashed his shirt against his body.

Rain began falling in scattered cold drops.

One of the men lunged first.

Eli jerked backward instinctively.

His heel slipped against the slick wood at the edge of the dock.

For one impossible second everybody froze.

Even the men.

Eli windmilled hard, trying to catch balance, but there was nothing behind him except dark river air.

Then he disappeared.

The splash cracked through the night.

Huge.

Violent.

River water exploded upward beneath the dock lights.

“Jesus Christ,” somebody breathed.

The current caught him instantly.

Hands surfaced once.

Then vanished.

The flashlight beams shook wildly across the black water.

“Get him!”

But nobody moved immediately.

That would matter later.

That hesitation.

That single terrible hesitation.

The rain came harder now.

Thunder rolled over Golden.

The older man stepped to the edge of the dock, breathing heavily as the river churned below.

But the boy was gone.

Only widening ripples remained.

The river moved slowly onward as if nothing had happened at all.

Behind the stacked crab crates, hidden deep in darkness, the small barefoot child clutched the wet leather ledger tightly against his chest and did not make a sound.

Chapter 1

The Shop on Alder Street

Part 1 — The Empty Storefront

The river smell followed the mornings in Golden.

Not every morning.

Only the wet ones.

Only when fog rolled low over the water and settled itself into the streets before sunrise, creeping uphill through alleyways and parking lots until the whole town smelled faintly of mud and rusted metal.

Clara Bell noticed it the second she stepped out of her car.

She stood beside the *Golden Dispatch* building with her purse hanging from one shoulder and stared across Alder Street.

The storefront had lights on.

That alone was enough to stop her.

For eleven years the building had sat empty between Palmer's Pharmacy and the tailor shop with the permanently sun-faded mannequins. Half the town had forgotten the place even existed.

Before that, it had been a jewelry store.

Before that, a hunting supply shop.

Before that, according to her father, a bakery where people used to line up before dawn for butter rolls wrapped in wax paper.

Now it simply existed as another dead thing downtown.

Or it had.

This morning the windows were clean.

Not just wiped down.

Clean-clean.

The kind of clean that exposed the age of the glass itself.

Inside, warm yellow lights glowed softly against dark wooden shelves.

Clara frowned.

Someone had painted the door black overnight.

Not glossy black.

Matte black.

Intentional.

There was no OPEN sign.

No business hours.

No advertisements.

Just the storefront.

Waiting.

A delivery truck groaned somewhere farther down the street. A church bell rang the half hour. The fog shifted slowly around parked cars.

Clara locked her sedan without taking her eyes off the building.

Something about it irritated her immediately.

Not because somebody moved in.

Because no one had heard about it first.

Golden was not a town where surprises survived long.

People in Golden knew:

- who missed mortgage payments,
- who drank too much after funerals,
- whose son got arrested in Mobile,
- who sat alone at restaurants after church.

The town processed information the way swamp water absorbed heat—slowly but completely.

Yet somehow somebody had rented an entire storefront downtown without Clara hearing a whisper.

That bothered her.

She crossed Alder Street slowly.

The fog thinned as the sun climbed somewhere behind the clouds. Up close, she noticed the brass door handle had been replaced too.

New lock.

New paint.

New glass shelving inside.

But the floors remained old pine, warped slightly toward the center from decades of humidity.

The smell reached her before she looked through the window.

Old paper.

Not mold exactly.

Older than that.

Paper that had absorbed years from attics and basements and closets.

The shelves inside held objects.

Not merchandise.

Objects.

A typewriter.

A stack of vinyl records tied with twine.

A cracked porcelain bird.

Several old cameras.

A child's lunchbox with faded cartoon astronauts peeling off the metal.

Everything arranged carefully.

Not like antiques for sale.

More like evidence.

Clara stepped closer to the glass.

Each object had a small handwritten tag beneath it.

No prices.

Only dates.

She leaned slightly, trying to read one.

APRIL 12, 1989

Another:

FOUND IN WALLS AFTER THE FLOOD

Her expression tightened.

“What in the world...”

The voice behind her made her jump slightly.

“You see him yet?”

Clara turned.

Martha Campbell stood on the sidewalk carrying two dry-cleaning bags and enough curiosity to power the electrical grid.

At seventy-three, Martha possessed the sharpest unofficial intelligence network in Golden.

“No,” Clara said.

Martha moved beside her immediately, peering through the glass.

“Well somebody’s in there. Lights came on around five-thirty. I called Donna at the Chamber of Commerce and she says nobody filed business paperwork.”

“That doesn’t sound legal.”

“Nothing in this town is legal if you wait long enough.”

Clara ignored that.

Martha leaned closer toward the window.

“Oh, I don’t like this.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t tell what kind of store it is.”

Clara almost smiled.

That was true.

Every shop in Golden usually announced itself loudly:
ANTIQUES

BAIT & TACKLE
SOUTHERN HOME DECOR
JESUS SAVES

This place announced nothing.

The fog shifted again.

Then Clara saw the sign hanging farther inside the store.

Simple white letters against dark wood.

WHERE LOST THINGS GO

No apostrophe.

No explanation.

No business name underneath.

Martha read it aloud softly.

“Well that sounds haunted.”

Clara kept staring at the sign.

Something unpleasant moved quietly through her stomach.

Not fear exactly.

Recognition.

As if the store had always been there waiting for someone to open it.

Part 2 — The Sign in the Window

As if the store had always been there waiting for someone to open it.

Clara stared at the sign another moment before finally stepping back from the glass.

“You think it’s antiques?” Martha asked.

“No.”

“What then?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s worse.”

Martha shifted the dry-cleaning bags higher on her arm and squinted through the window again like she might solve the mystery through irritation alone.

People had started slowing their cars now.

That happened fast in Golden.

A plumber's van crawled past twice.

A woman walking a dachshund stopped outright on the sidewalk.

Two high school boys on skateboards nearly collided while craning their necks toward the storefront.

The attention gathered organically, like flies finding sugar.

Clara checked her watch.

Seven-forty-three.

The *Dispatch* editorial meeting started at eight.

She should leave.

Instead she remained standing there.

Inside the shop, farther toward the back, movement crossed briefly between the shelves.

A man.

Only a glimpse.

Tall.

Lean.

Dark long-sleeved shirt rolled to the forearms.

Then gone again.

Martha inhaled sharply.

“There he is.”

The figure disappeared behind a tall bookcase near the rear wall.

No music played inside.

No television.

No cash register sounds.

Just quiet.

A strange kind of quiet too.

Not empty.

Occupied.

The town seemed to feel it immediately.

More people slowed down.

A cyclist dismounted entirely and stood at the curb staring.

Clara noticed something else then.

The front display window contained only ordinary objects earlier.

Now a single shelf at the center stood empty beneath a brass spotlight.

Waiting.

“For what?” Martha muttered.

Almost on cue, the man reappeared.

He carried something folded carefully in both hands.

Conversation outside lowered instinctively.

Even traffic noise seemed to soften.

The man moved with irritating calm.

Not theatrical.

Not mysterious on purpose.

Just precise.

He placed the folded object onto the display stand and adjusted it once beneath the light.

Then he stepped back.

The crowd outside leaned unconsciously toward the glass.

A child’s raincoat.

Small.

Bright red.

Old-fashioned yellow buttons.

White stitching near the cuffs.

One sleeve slightly torn at the wrist.

Clara's stomach dropped so suddenly she grabbed the window frame beside her.

No.

No, that couldn't be—

Martha whispered first.

“Oh dear God.”

The raincoat sat under the brass light like evidence.

Clara knew it instantly.

Not because she had seen the coat itself before.

Because every person in Golden over thirty knew the story attached to it.

Lila Grayson.

Seven years old.

Missing for three days after a storm twenty-two years earlier.

They found her alive eventually two counties over, wandering beside a gas station barefoot and half-delirious.

But before they found her, divers dragged the river for forty-eight hours because witnesses swore they saw a small red raincoat near the floodwater.

The image became local folklore.

Parents locking doors.

Children forbidden near drainage ditches.

Church vigils.

The Red Raincoat Girl.

Clara looked hard at the display.

This wasn't similar.

It was exact.

Even the tear near the sleeve.

She remembered the newspaper photograph.

Her father had worked the story before his stroke.

Same coat.

Martha stepped backward from the window.

“No.”

“Maybe it’s another one,” Clara said automatically.

“You know that’s not another one.”

“How would he even get it?”

“That family moved to Tennessee fifteen years ago.”

A pickup truck stopped directly in the street now.

Its driver stared openly through the windshield.

Across Alder Street, somebody exited the pharmacy carrying a prescription bag and immediately forgot where they were walking.

The man inside the shop noticed none of it.

Or pretended not to.

He simply adjusted another object on a shelf farther back.

Calm.

Unhurried.

As though he had not just placed a town memory under glass.

Clara’s pulse thudded painfully in her throat.

Something about the raincoat felt wrong beyond coincidence.

Intentional.

Like the first sentence in a conversation nobody wanted reopened.

The shop door clicked.

Unlocked.

Every head outside lifted slightly.

But the man never looked toward the crowd.

He vanished deeper into the store again.

Leaving the red coat glowing quietly beneath the brass light.

Part 3 — The First Object

By nine-thirty, half of downtown Golden had found an excuse to pass Alder Street.

Clara watched from the *Dispatch* office window upstairs while pretending to review obituary submissions.

Nobody walked normally past the shop anymore.

They slowed.

Looked.

Pretended not to look.

Then looked again.

Golden loved two things more than church:
mystery and permission.

Theo's storefront offered both.

"Still staring at the ghost shop?"

Clara looked up.

Edgar Wren stood in her doorway balancing a styrofoam cup of vending-machine coffee and several folded newspapers beneath one arm. His suspenders strained heroically against his stomach.

"People are clogging traffic," Clara said.

"That's not an answer."

Edgar wandered toward the window beside her.

At sixty-eight, he had been writing editorials at the *Dispatch* since before Clara learned multiplication tables. He distrusted modern grammar, chain restaurants, and anything described as artisanal.

He peered downward.

"Well I'll be damned."

"You know the raincoat?"

"Everybody knows the raincoat."

"Do you think it's real?"

Edgar sipped his coffee.

“I think somebody moving into Golden and immediately displaying one of this town’s oldest bad memories is either very brave or very stupid.”

“Or manipulative.”

“That too.”

Clara folded her arms.

“What kind of business even is this?”

Edgar shrugged.

“Could be art.”

“Golden doesn’t have art.”

“That explains why everybody’s outside.”

Below them, two elderly women stood directly at the storefront pointing toward the coat while speaking with visible agitation.

Another group had formed near the curb.

Clara watched as a teenage girl photographed the window.

“It feels deliberate,” she said quietly.

Edgar glanced sideways at her.

“Everything people do on purpose is deliberate.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yes.”

He set the coffee down beside her desk.

“The question is whether he understands what he’s stirring up.”

“And if he does?”

Edgar looked back toward the street.

“Then he didn’t come here accidentally.”

That settled heavily between them.

Clara looked again toward the shop.

A man exited carrying nothing.