

THE WAILING GATES

1

Her tell, her calling card for nerves, was to scratch a point at the base of her neck. Jane Jones had been playing the game of motherhood for eleven years. The longest she'd been away from her daughter was for a weekend trip with her husband to visit, for the last time, the place they had met all those years ago. Valerie had looked after her precious child then, and although she had complete faith in her own mother's abilities, Jane had still fretted constantly. The back of her neck was red now. The evidence of her worry, caused by her daughter being away for a week-long residential skiing trip in the French alps in the run-up to Christmas. Pitch black thoughts would creep, without consent, into her plagued mind. *So many things could go wrong, from the arduous coach journey on slippery mountain roads to horrific skiing injuries.* "Relax," Jane muttered to herself one day whilst practicing the breathing exercises she had been taught by the grief councillor. "She's perfectly safe, and she's having one of the most fun weeks of her life so far. She'll be back before you know it." She couldn't bear the thought of losing the person she loved the most. Not again.

2

The wind was unhappy that day; or so it seemed to Meadow Jones. In her eleven years of life she had never felt it so cold against her cheeks. Like razorblades forged in ice they cut her soft skin, relentless. Perhaps the weather was the reason for her sense of urgency. Perhaps it was the lingering feeling in the depths of her mind that she was forgetting something important. Whatever it was, Meadow Jones was in a hurry. She rushed through the familiar streets of her city, illuminated in the twinkling fairy lights and tinsel that reappeared almost magically overnight every December. It was a world still relatively new and exciting to her young senses. If she had been walking more slowly, as she usually did, she would have noticed the sights and smells were slightly different. It was only when she took a left down a side street instead of her habitual right that she began to realise something wasn't quite normal. She thought about turning back, but her youthful curiosity got the better of her internal voice of reason. She had never explored this part of the city before.

A middle-aged woman stood outside her front door, with a grey shawl wrapped around her hunched shoulders.

"Welcome!" she said, her voice warm against the brisk night air. Meadow had been warned not to interact with strangers, but this woman seemed nice, so she gave her a little smile of acknowledgement. Meadow pressed on further through the cobbled street that seemed at once so far away from the city. Meadow was used to the growl of buses and trains near her house; this place made her feel as if she had stepped back in time two hundred years. There were no artificial lights here, but she could see candles and oil lamps in the windows.

The street ended, opening into a circular courtyard overgrown with weeds and ivy. In the exact centre was a cenotaph. The courtyard calmly commemorated the

dead. The whole area was blanketed in a thick blue mist, which defocused the yellow lamplight that shone down from above. The lights were placed invitingly either side of the ornate black iron gates of a large brick building. The mist's arrival had seemingly ushered out the cold, for Meadow now found herself pleasantly warm. This reassuring fog told her that she was not wrong to continue this journey into the unknown. She approached the gates. The nearer she got, the louder the sound came from beyond them. At first, the groans of several people seeped through the iron bars. They transformed into screams, coming from a hundred invisible throats. Finally, they reached a crescendo, a chilling wail that cut through the night like a knife through hot wax. Pushing through the sickening noise, Meadow reached the gates. As soon as she touched them, the shrieks stopped. Her ears still ringing, she turned, feeling a presence behind her. It was an old man, dressed all in black. His eyes were milky white, the outline of his non-existent pupils the only evidence that he once enjoyed vision.

"Excuse me sir, where are we? What is this place?" Meadow asked, her strong curiosity fighting against the frailty of her trembling voice.

"Why, my dear, these are the Wailing Gates." he replied. Meadow turned back to inspect further.

"What's beyond them?" she asked. But when she turned again, the man was gone. There was not even an imprint in the mist to suggest he had ever been there. Feeling more anxious, she decided it was time to leave this mysterious place for good. But the seed of excitement was growing in her brain, and before she had taken a single step away from the gates, her hands were drawn magnetically to the handle. It was unlocked. She opened the gates and stepped forward into the building.

It was a train station. The walls were a light pink. The furniture was handcrafted oak. The scent of freshly ground coffee from the cafe section embraced the air and greeted Meadow's nostrils softly. But these details only registered in her brain after the main attraction had been acknowledged: the steam train. Sleek black metal met misted glass windows framed with brass. Smiling faces beamed out of the gaps towards loved ones on the platform. It immediately gave Meadow a welcoming sensation. She found herself drawn to the ticket office. "Hello," she began to the lady behind the desk. "Where does this train go?" She received silence in response. Instead of words, she received a ticket of creamy paper. Printed at the top in four scarlet letters was *HOME*.

"Oh..." Meadow could manage, surprised but strangely understanding. Heading to the train, she felt comfortable. Everything that seemed uncertain in the back of her mind would soon become clear. *I'm coming home*, she thought, as she boarded and the inspector clipped her ticket.

3

With a single sentence, Michael Jones's life ended. He could feel the cancer burning through his body already, but the doctor's confirmation made it seem all the more real. The amplified physical pain was just the beginning. The tortuous attempt to treat it was a regularly scheduled onslaught that pushed him, his wife, and his young daughter, who was too young to fully comprehend what was going on, to the very

limit. Despite the best efforts of doctors and nurses, Michael died on the 15th of September of a year that henceforth became a dark blot in the history books for the Jones family. It was a supermassive black hole, enveloping all the positivity of the past, present, and future belonging to that moment. It was also an eclipse, obstructing the view of any good left in the world almost completely. His wife Jane was never the same again. His daughter Meadow was introduced to concepts she should have been blissfully unaware of for many more years. The last thing Michael ever said, lying in his hospital bed, holding Jane's trembling hand, was "I'm ready." It was a lie. How could he ever be ready for what came next, when no one had ever known what that was? Probably nothing. But as selfless as ever, he wasn't thinking about himself. He was thinking about how his wife and daughter's lives, and how he would no longer play a part in them. He breathed his final breath and created a rupture in Jane and Meadow's lives that would never ever truly be closed.

4

Sadiq was smiling his perpetual grin at her. That was the first thing that came back to Meadow's memory as she got used to the rhythm of the train. She always sat next to Sadiq on the bus to school, but this was far more exciting. A sleek, modern coach, with comfy leather seats. There was even a small television screen in the back of the seat in front. Just as well, because the journey to the French alps was taking forever. It was the longest journey Meadow had ever been on, and not even the light comedy she was watching could fight her boredom. It was a boredom exacerbated by her excitement. If she wasn't so excited about the destination, the skiing resort that she had been daydreaming about in lessons for weeks, she wouldn't have been so bored.

"Let's play eye spy." Sadiq offered.

"Fine... you go first." Meadow replied, feigning enthusiasm to try to trick herself into a interested mind-set.

"I spy, with my little eye, something beginning with—" but he was cut off by the lurch of the coach. The driver had swerved to avoid a car coming the other way down the mountain path. The coach skidded on the icy tarmac. The side crashed through the metal barrier at the side of the road. It was precariously balanced on the edge of the cliff-side, full of forty screaming children. Tears streaked down Meadow's face, now frozen in a petrified grimace. She looked at Sadiq, her best friend, whose trademark grin was nowhere to be seen. The teacher Miss Garcia stood up at the front of the coach.

"Everyone stay calm! Nobody make any sudden moves!" But her voice was shaking, and it was clear to see in her eyes that she could not see a way out of this. Her worries were proven right. The wheel slipped on the uneven rocks underneath it, and the coach plunged headfirst down the mountainside. It was a blur. A flash of intense pain somewhere around Meadow's chin. The sickening sensation of warm fresh blood dripping down her neck. The screams of pure terror coming from her classmates. Then blackness, pure and infinite.

Meadow snapped back to reality. She felt the smooth seat beneath her. She felt the calming motion of the train on the tracks through her whole body. A breeze

caressed her face from a partially opened window nearby. She was safe and sound on-board the homeward-bound train. Shaken up by the nightmare she had just experienced, but physically fine. *It was a horrible dream*, she thought to herself. *It must have been. How could I be sitting here, perfectly alive and well otherwise?* Still, something felt wrong. It had seemed so vivid and real, like she had actually been remembering something that had happened recently. She decided to go to the bathroom. She splashed some cold water on her face, which made her feel slightly better. As she was touching her face, she felt an unfamiliarity. A large scar, a jagged line, on her chin. She had no idea how it had got there. Unless... there was a knock on the door.

“Excuse me, young lady, but we’re approaching your stop. It would be a terrible shame if you missed it.” the ticket inspector’s voice said from the other side of the door. Meadow, far from relaxed, walked to the nearest train doors. The great vehicle slowed to a halt at the station. The doors seem to exhale as they opened. Meadow stepped out onto the platform.

It was her local train station. She had been there several times before, and it was not far from her house. That seemed the logical place to go next. She exited the station and began the walk home. The light breeze and familiar location was making her feel more comfortable. She didn't understand what was happening, but she knew she was physically unharmed and soon she would see her mum, who could always make everything okay again. She was home in a few minutes. It felt like she hadn't been there in weeks. She knocked on the door, coated with the fading yellow paint that she loved. Time held its breath as Meadow waited for a response. Finally, after several minutes, she heard footsteps coming towards the other side of the door. It opened. Her mother opened the door, stepping out immediately, not looking at Meadow.

“Mum! It’s me, I’m home!” Meadow said brightly. But her mother didn't respond, or even seem to hear her. Instead she proceeded to walk to the side of the house. Meadow watched her take the recycling bins and place them at the front gate, ready for collection. *Why is she ignoring me? Have I done something wrong?* Meadow felt hot tears of confusion, and the anger it brought on, moisten her face. She called out for her mother several more times. growing increasingly worried and confused. Eventually, she decided to go through the open door into her own house. She walked through the familiar corridor and noticed that a fine layer of dust had developed on the floor. *That’s strange*, Meadow thought. *Usually mum is so committed to keeping the house clean and tidy.* She went into her bedroom, and her body stood rooted to the spot. It felt so... different. The atmosphere was so alien that Meadow felt as if she had walked into a stranger’s room. All the furniture was still there, but her bed, usually left messy as Meadow rushed out of the house for school, was perfectly made, the sheets crisp as if they had been freshly ironed a few hours ago. Unlike the corridor, there was no dust in sight. In fact, it seemed unnaturally clean. Her book shelf was arranged neatly. Her numerous teddy bears sat as if in conference together at the foot of her bed. Her beloved Lego models, usually strewn haphazardly across the floor, now stood like trophies of her creativity on her desk. Any loose pieces were meticulously sorted into boxes that were neatly piled in the corner.

Then she noticed it. The photograph. It was herself, smiling back at her. She had seen the photo before, framed in the kitchen. It had been taken on her eleventh

birthday, in the local park. She seemed ostensibly happy, but she could also see the underlying sadness that had never gone away since her father's death. It was Meadow's favourite photograph of herself. *But why was it on her desk?* She noticed two thick candles either side of the portrait. She could faintly smell the lightly scented smoke - they had been lit recently. Her mother came into her room. Meadow looked at her face properly for the first time that day. She almost gasped audibly. Her mother looked five years older than the last time Meadow had seen her. Thick grey-black bags drooped under her bloodshot eyes that looked as if they hadn't rested sufficiently in weeks. She noticed her clothes. *Mum used to dress so nicely, with bright patterns and co-ordinating colours; flowing dresses and scarves and hats.* Now she wore a baggy T-shirt and jogging bottoms, both in a similarly lifeless grey. The brown dressing gown that added a layer of warmth was fraying from frequent wear. Meadow called out to her mother again, more forcefully this time, begging for a response. But again, she wasn't given one. Her mother turned her head to look directly at Meadow, just above her eye-line, but it was as if she were looking straight through her. As if her own daughter were transparent. Desperate, Meadow touched her mum's shoulder. She reached out and patted her arm. Her mother winced, immediately moving her hand to the place Meadow's had just been, as if a cold breeze had just passed over it. Starting to panic, Meadow rushed out of her room without looking back. She found herself in the living room. A man stood, facing away from her. Even from behind, he seemed familiar. She was surprised, as there hadn't been a man in the house for years. "Hello?" she said, feeling a mixture of fear and anticipation, her heartbeat rising. The man turned. Meadow's heart momentarily forgot its purpose. It was her father.

Before the scream that was building in her throat could be released, he had rushed towards her and was embracing her.

"Meadow... my love. My baby. I'm so sorry." His eyes were bright with tears. Meadow was hyperventilating in a complete state of shock.

"Wh-wh-what... what's happening?" she managed, through guttural sobs.

"I thought this day would never come. I always thought I would never be able to touch you again. I'm so sorry you're here. Everything is going to be okay."

But Meadow couldn't stay any longer. She ran out of the living room, away from her father, brushed past her mother in the corridor, and pushed the door open, slamming it closed behind her. She sprinted out onto the street, eyes streaming with tears, head racing with inexplicable thoughts. Nothing made sense. She must be dreaming, or hallucinating. *Dad died years ago. But he seemed so real just then.* She saw a figure on the other side of the road. It was the same old man that she had seen near the big black gates earlier that day. The Wailing Gates, he'd called them.

"You... I saw you earlier!" she said.

"Indeed, you did. That must seem like a long time ago now, doesn't it Meadow?" he replied, an unreadable expression on his old face. His black robes billowed around him, despite the fact there was no wind.

"How do you know my name?" Meadow asked. "Whatever's going on, please, make it stop! I want this to be over! I want to wake up!" She had so many questions. Why did her mum not recognise her? Why was her house so different? How was her dad there? Why did the dream-like memories of the coach crash feel so real? The old man looked down at her.

“Your questions will be answered soon enough my dear,” Death said. “But first I have one for you: where do you think we are?”