



PROLOGUE:

LUCY

We are an innocent lot, my two brothers, four sisters and me, born on as ordinary a land as God ever made. Our tobacco farm in Riverton, North Carolina, is far from Oma's soaring mountains in the Black Forest of Germany, where tall trees dim the light of day and the tales of the Brothers Grimm grow out of the loamy soil. Where even a polished apple holds peril. Her stories raise the hairs on the backs of our necks, and fear prickles and chills our skin. Telling tales is Oma's best talent.

After, when prayers are said and we're tucked in our featherbed, and the house turns still as stone, I lie between Cora and Lydia, and we remember, and clutch hands until our grips soften, safe in this place, for our grandmother's stories live far across the sea.

But they are real.

Because of the wolpertinger.

Oma's grandfather came upon the creature in 1881 while hunting, and he preserved it for all time. It is seventeen and a quarter inches long and is equal part rabbit, roebuck antlers, and falcon wings. Because wolpertingers thrive only in crisp air filtered through evergreens and washed clean in clouds, we'll never see wolpertingers in Mercer County. Our humid air is too heavy to conduct magic.

The creature came to America in a wooden box with a hinged door, and for the years Oma lives with us, it resides on top of her Bavarian armoire. We take turns cleaning it with a feather duster, but we never touch its eyes for they are hazy and off-kilter.

Of her seven grandchildren, I am Oma's favorite. In private, she tells me so. It's because I am curious and have a deductive mind. I collect obscure words like misnomer for contradiction, and knave for someone dishonest. My favorite word is enigma, for without mystery to challenge a curious mind, it starves. My brother Grady calls me high and mighty for using ten-dollar words in a ten-cent town. Out loud, I call him rude, but inside my head, I know he's a chuff. Mama says I can be insensitive. She says language is meant to communicate, not separate, so I mostly spend ten-dollar words inside my head.

Oma never returns to Germany. She dies in Riverton on the twentieth of May, and her granite tombstone is etched with a mountain sketch we've only seen on the page of a travel book in our library. At her passing, our hope for thrilling danger passes with her.

We fear nothing will happen here...here where a lazy river rolls by, outsiders are rare, and farming rules our days.

We think we are safe here, where nothing happens—until something comes that undoes us all.