

The LOST BOYS of BARLOWE THEATER

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Books by Jaime Jo Wright

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The Lost Boys of Barlowe Theater

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JAIME JO WRIGHT

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To Uncle Ken Wright

You've always encouraged me to aim high,
to chase my potential and believe in great dreams.
But more than that, you've just always been there
—even when you didn't have to be.

And to the "lost" ones

May you know your value.
The lost shall be found. Always.

Greta Mercy

OCTOBER 1915

KIPPER'S GROVE, WISCONSIN

Sometimes death came quietly. A phantom swooping in and siphoning the last remnant of a soul from one's body, leaving behind a shell of a person who once was and would never be again. Other times, death decided that dramatics coupled with terror were its preferred method of delivery. Tonight, that was the chosen form death took.

Screams echoed throughout the theater's golden, embellished auditorium and drifted upward to the domed, hand-painted ceiling, where Putti flew as angelic, childlike spirits over the mass of onlookers.

A shoulder rammed into Greta's arm as a husky man, far too large for the narrow seats, pushed his way past her toward the center aisle.

"Let me pass!" he barked. Urgency spurred him forward. "I'm a doctor, let me pass!"

The vaudeville lights on either side of the stage boasted letters *a* through *g*, with the *g* lit and distinct over the other letters.

"I'm letter *g*!" The doctor shouted while those in front of him jostled to the side or hurried ahead to move out of his way. Doctors were assigned specific letters from the vaudeville lights, and if they were lit, a doctor was needed—either at home, on call, or in the vicinity.

The vicinity was here. It was now.

Onlookers continued to gasp and protest. Women in beautiful silks and satins hurried to the back to find respite in the upstairs ladies' room. Men in evening wear catapulted over seats and to the floor on the far left of the auditorium.

Greta was frozen in place, her seat having flipped up against its back so she could move. But her eyes were fixed with horror on the scene unfolding. They lifted to one of the box seats above the floor, where men, including the doctor, were congregating en masse. The gilded box

was a flurry of activity. A man embraced a woman, who fought and clawed at his hold. Her screams had many onlookers staring at her, including the performer in her violet gown and befeathered hair. Moments before, her vocals had swirled around them all in a cadence of beauty and refined music. Now, her mouth was open, her face pale, her entire pose aghast. She had captured an enthralled audience, all whose gazes toward the stage had kept them from seeing what Greta had seen. Greta, who shouldn't have been here to begin with. She didn't belong with the pomp and circumstance, the heady scent of perfume and cologne, which made her mind thick and her eyes wander. They'd wandered to the box seat, and she'd witnessed what no one else had. The white hands stretching, reaching over the side, dangling . . .

"It was a *child!*" The horrified cry slipped for the third time from Greta's lips. She could hear herself screaming and was unable to stop. Her screams had ripped through the performance as the child in a white nightdress plummeted into the shadows of the floor's obscure corner.

The woman in the box seat had been pulled from view, its red velvet curtain shut swiftly.

"It was a baby!" Greta rasped out as horror strangled her.

"Greta. It's all right." The reassuring voice of her friend, Eleanor Boyd, as well as the comforting grip on Greta's arm finally stilled her.

Greta focused again on her friend—her wealthy friend who should not be her friend at all.

Eleanor's blue eyes were round with fear that must mirror Greta's own. Her blond curls swept upward and were twisted with pearls. Her dress was a baby-blue silk. Any other moment, Greta would have soaked in the awe that tonight she, Greta Boyd, who could barely keep her family fed and clothed, was sitting among the elite, pretending to be one of them. But now? It hardly mattered. The borrowed corset that tucked in her waistline, the aged but wearable pink dress she had borrowed from Eleanor, and even the gloves she wore on her dry, cracked hands—none of them mattered now.

"What happened? What did you see?" Eleanor clutched at Greta's arm.

Greta couldn't reply. The sheer magnitude of the moment, the honor of being in the audience of the Barlowe Theater had been overwhelming . . . until she'd seen it. The *baby* launched over the side of the box seat. Like a cherub from the mural above, it had taken flight before it disappeared.

Greta's knees gave out, and she fell to where her seat should have been had it not folded in on itself. Her hip struck the polished wood arm.

“Greta!” Eleanor reached for her.

Greta felt Eleanor’s brother on her other side, grabbing for her waist to give her support. But it was too late. She had collapsed to the narrow walkway between the seats. Her knees hit the carpeted floor.

Was she the only person who had seen death’s swift visitation tonight? The only one who had witnessed its evil intent as it ripped the babe forcefully from its mother’s arms?

It wouldn’t survive. It could not. The fall was too far, too great.

Death had decided to match the theater’s reputation for drama and awe. Greta couldn’t tear her gaze from where she’d seen the small form disappear on its way to its resting place on the floor of the Barlowe Theater.

The babe had slipped. No, it had been *tossed*. Its mother’s screams still echoed from the hallway beyond the curtain. Those in the crowd cried “Accident,” “Traumatic mishap,” and other such things. But Greta knew differently. She had known before she came tonight, and she should have stayed away.

Barlowe Theater was not a place that brought joy and entertainment, as was its supposed purpose. No, it had already taken lives in the construction of it, tortured the ones who dared stand in its way, and now it was hunting those innocents who had happened into the shadows of its deadly interior. The theater was cursed.

Kit Boyd

OCTOBER, PRESENT DAY
KIPPER'S GROVE, WISCONSIN

Death stuck with a place. Once the blood had seeped into the carpet, the flooring, the walls, it stayed there, long after the stains were removed. They were the testament to lives robbed of their rightful journey through time. Cut short. Obliterated. Bludgeoned into nonexistence. Smothered by the grave, burrowed into by the worms—

“Hey!”

Fingers snapped in front of Kit Boyd's face, and she startled out of her staring into the dark, narrow stairwell that led beneath the stage of the Barlowe Theater.

“Get with it, bruh.” The fingers snapped again. Kit looked up at the taller man beside her. He was overweight and smelled like pizza, but he had a nice face. His name was Tom, they'd told her, the crew from the TV show *Psychic and the Skeptic*.

“Sorry.” Kit offered him a wince. She'd paused on the first concrete step while her best friend, Madison, the psychic medium, Heather Grant, and the skeptic investigator, Evan Fischer, disappeared into the bowels of the theater. Tom the cameraman was held back by her hesitation. She gave him a warning look, though the theater's darkness in the midnight atmosphere probably hid most of her expression. “You *do* know people died here . . . have disappeared here.”

“That's the point.” Tom waved her forward, the camera on his shoulder blinking a red light. “But I need to catch them on film if I can, and you're in my way.”

Fabulous. She was on camera. That would probably make the show too. Kit Boyd, the quirky sidekick to Madison Farrington, the historical activist, the beauty, the granddaughter of the town's ambitious CEO of all things expansion, modern, and money-making.

“Hello?” There was definite irritation in Tom’s voice.

“I’m *going!* I’m going.” Kit hurried down the steps. She’d taken them many times before. Anyone who was native to Kipper’s Grove, Wisconsin, had grown up in the Barlowe Theater at one point or another. Dancers had tapped and glided across its stage in recitals, high school glee clubs with dreams of Broadway had warbled off-key through its hall, and the local theater guild had put on such plays as *Arsenic and Old Lace* and *The Music Man*. Kit hadn’t been in any of those. Instead, she was the one backstage handing bottles of water to the performers, smiling and cracking jokes to encourage the stage-frozen little six-year-old dressed in a yellow tutu with glitter on her cheeks.

“Oh, *c’mon!*” Tom hissed, his irritation past the point of being hidden. How he’d gotten behind her anyway was a faux pas for filming. He was supposed to stick close to the stars of the show, Heather and Evan. And boy, did those two get along famously—*not*.

“Whew!” Kit wheezed under her breath, not caring if Tom heard. “I’d try to avoid those two if you could.”

“Yeah, well, I have a job to do.” Tom squeezed past Kit as she hugged the cement-block wall at the bottom of the stairs to let him through. He elbowed her arm and didn’t bother to apologize. He probably felt as if she owed him that luxury. The luxury of being annoyed.

Okay, fine. She did.

If she was being honest, Kit wasn’t a fan of the Barlowe Theater past dark. Which was the cliché of all theaters built just after the turn of the century. It was dark. Haunted. The place was like a tomb. Crank up some vaudeville music and the place became a literal haunted house of horrors for Halloween. And Kit hated Halloween. The darkness, the Gothic look and feel, Halloween was for morbid people who thought Edgar Allan Poe was romantic in his mystery and lore instead of macabre and bleak. Hadn’t he died questionably? She’d heard a podcast once that claimed the poet might have been murdered, contrary to the popular belief that his death had been the result of some fatal malady undiagnosed.

Kit shook her head to clear her thoughts. Mom said cobwebs couldn’t possibly gather in her head because she had too many ideas. Mom was right. Kit would never be accused of having an underactive imagination.

A finger jabbed into the back of her shoulder.

“Stop it!” Kit spun to glare at the offender.

No one was there.

Her skin began crawling. “Gahhhhhh!” She waved her hands wildly at the unseen ghost finger. Probably her imagination, but whatever. She had let Madison sucker her into a ghost hunt for the popular ghost-hunting television show. This was her penance? Getting poked by an elusive spirit?

“Sorry, God.” Kit mumbled an apology to the Almighty, who was probably rolling His eyes at their attempts to mess with the spirit world. But this was Madison. She believed *anything* was possible. Kit had been raised to believe that this type of *anything* was probably demonic. There had to be a middle ground. Hadn’t there?

Kit hurried around the corner, stubbing her toe on a bolt that rose half an inch up from the floor. Dampness and time had warped the theater’s floor, making it uneven. She leaned against the wall, rubbing her bare toe. Flip-flops on a ghost hunt. Bad idea.

She looked around—well, as best as she could. The basement was dark, as were the dressing rooms to her right, sized like prison cells. The short hall to her left leading directly below the stage was also dark.

“Hello, darkness,” Kit crooned quietly, craning her neck to peer ahead. “Hello?” she tried again, this time louder.

No answer.

“Seriously, someone?” Kit was beginning to share Tom the cameraman’s annoyance now. Two argumentative television stars, her best friend, and a cameraman didn’t just vanish within minutes. The basement wasn’t *that* huge.

But it was Barlowe Theater.

“*Tom?*” Kit hissed, daring a few steps into the dank blackness. “Madison?”

Again, no one answered. The only light was a flickering bulb that had to be a wattage short of worth having at all. It buzzed too. Of course it did. If this stunt was for show dramatics . . .

“Madison!” Kit shouted. In the ten years since they’d graduated high school, she had followed this woman around. She was owed some loyalty in return. “If this is for ratings, it’s unkind of you!” Kit yelled. Her words echoed back at her.

“Madis—”

Light slammed into her face, blinding Kit. She raised her hands as the flashlight's beam collided with her eyes.

"They're gone!" It was Tom.

Kit could see the whites of his eyes just beyond the flashlight he swung around wildly.

"What do you mean?" Kit tried to take captive Tom's arm as he flooded the hallway with the light, then a dressing room, then the ceiling. His camera wasn't on his shoulder.

He wasn't filming.

Kit's throat tightened. Okay, that wasn't a good sign. "Where's Madison?"

Tom swung the light back in Kit's face. "Where's Evan? Where's Heather? Where's my *team*?" His voice shook with undisguised concern, turning fast into panic. "How big is this place?"

"Not *that* big." Kit pushed past him. Concerned now. This had gone too far. Madison and her harebrained schemes to keep her own grandfather from ruining the historic downtown. Make it famous, she said. Put it on TV, she said. Make viewers defend Kipper's Grove, she said. "Madison!" Kit shouted, anxiousness seeping into her voice. "Stop this! It's not funny!"

Tom's light bounced on the floor in front of them as Kit spun around and marched back toward him. She shoved past his husky chest and down the short passage to the door leading under the stage. Her fingers curled around the doorknob, its old mechanics making it wobbly beneath her grip.

Kit jerked it open.

She fell back with a shriek, colliding with Tom, who had come way too close behind her.

Heather, the medium from the show, stood stock-still facing them. Her eyes were wide and unfocused, her skin white in the flashlight's glow.

"She's gone." Heather's monotone voice filtered through the passage.

Kit words were stolen from her as her stomach dropped.

"Who's gone?" Tom demanded.

"Madison." Evan Fischer, the cohost, the skeptic, and the all-around grumpy hero of the show

strode past his partner. Heather's expression didn't waver as her eyes remained fixated on . . . whatever she was staring at in the spirit world beyond. "Madison's gone."

Evan left less than a few inches between his face and Kit's as he bent his six-foot frame down to meet her five-foot-four one. "Where is she?"

"I don't kn—"

"Where. Is. She?" He cut off Kit's answer as unsatisfactory.

Her breaths came shorter, faster. She could feel Tom behind her. She was sandwiched between him and Evan, with Heather staring into the great abyss.

"I told you. I don't know." Kit heard the quaver in her voice. She shoved her trembling hands into her pockets.

"She's gone." Evan slapped the wall, glaring at Tom, who was speechless. "Is this a scam? A stunt?"

Kit couldn't answer. Of course, the show would think it was a ploy by Madison. A publicity ploy. But it went deeper than that. Far deeper. Kit sagged against the wall, the air not reaching her lungs as it should.

She prayed then. Prayed that Madison really was messing with them. That she had simply gone too far ahead beneath the stage and left them behind.

But the theater was hungry, and everyone in Kipper's Grove knew it was only a matter of time before this hunger added to the stories of death and spirits. That's how the theater was, after all. Drama. Suspense. And the unearthly way that such things drifted through its rafters.