

"Something Lost"

January began like every year before it: the sun was high in the sky and the air was a chilly 70 degrees. Those who grew up on Cyprus Island had never known the meaning of cold in their lives and never expected to. That's how it was in Georgia. Day in and day out, it was cycles of warm, hot, and the gates of Hades. At Christmas, everyone on the island gathered in the small, ancient church building and sang songs of winter snow and in the summer the children met at Dare's Ice Cream Shop for a taste of what they were missing.

On the first day of each year, the families of Cyprus Island had a tradition of going down to the beach to bring in the new year. To miss the New Year's Swim would be to miss your own birthday. It happened rain or shine, hot or cold, safe or not. Of course, the day Chance Sparrow was born, his mother was alone in her bed, waiting for her friends and family to come home and help her deliver her child after the swim. When she gave birth all alone, she expected them to return joyful at the surprise. Of course, they never quite did.

On January 8th, Issa Sparrow left the ghost town and headed to the mainland where no one gave her a second glance. All reports from the island had been there were no survivors. No one had even bothered to check the dilapidated hut on the northern shore where they would have found two very alive Sparrows struggling to hide themselves from the angry sea. It did not like being denied its due sacrifice.

As Chance grew up, the tale of Cyprus Island manifested all over the world in different ways. All sorts of scientists flocked to the island to investigate. False accounts of the moment of the rapture exploded across the internet. Above all, however, were the ghost stories that were told around the campfires of children, all holding on to the darkest hints of truth behind fabricated mystery. And nowhere did these stories grow like Westbrook, the nearest population of any sorts to the site of the tragedy, though it was miles from the island accessible only by boat. It even became a childish past-time to sneak

out of home in the dead of night and row across the bay to visit the lost town. They would pitch camp within the very walls of Dare's and set fires on the floor to keep themselves warm when the unseasonable chills came.

They always came.

Eventually, Issa Sparrow moved on with her life, taking a job at the local bait shop and meeting a man who didn't care about where she came from or why her only family was a toddler that followed her everywhere. Issa believed it was about time something in her life turned out well. Two years later, Chance's half-sister was born.

Sara grew up without the loneliness that Chance felt. She never had that emptiness in her soul that said, "Something is missing; You are lost." She never felt his urge to jump into the ocean and swim out past the breakers into the unknown. She never was forbidden by their mother to touch the deep blue of the waves for reasons Issa would not explain.

Soon, the children got older and the memory of Cyprus Island faded into a distant whisper where no one seemed to care much anymore for the mystery. It was settled, according to "officials." The island suffered a sudden tsunami that wiped off the entire beach, taking the dead bodies of the islanders into the unknown ocean. They said there were signs of undetected underground tremors and the devastation of the shore had to have been caused by an extreme water level. No one bothered to question how there was a tsunami on just one small island on the east coast without anyone noticing.

Out of nowhere, on a stormy Tuesday—New Year's Eve to be precise—a local police department released a warning to the public, cautioning anyone from taking a boat across the bay. Therefore, every teenager in Westbrook went out that night to the forgotten town on Cyprus Island, Chance and Sara Sparrow included. When Chance's fingertips brushed across the water over the edge of the motorboat, he could have sworn he felt a warm pulse touch him back, whispering in his head about how lovely it

would be to swim the rest of the way. Little Sara just laughed at him when he mentioned it to her. The water grew chilly again, and even Chance believed he'd imagined the feeling.

Empty your mind and imagine what an 18-year abandoned beach town looks like in the dead of night. The waters were still so that the half-moon and splattering of stars reflected on the deep blue-ness and into the eyes of wondering children. The sand was muddy with the stillness of empty shells, the homes of sea creatures long gone. Across the bay shone the single, flickering beam of a lighthouse, dying just as it hit the first row of washed out houses. The roads were overgrown with weeds and flowers, and there were broken pylons cemented to the sea floor, the only reminder of a bridge that once was. From the first road into the city, old bricks peeled from buildings, leaving the dirty white of plaster exposed to the air. Store signs were falling from their perches like flightless chicks, many missing letters and all missing paint. The houses at the edges of town were preserved in cakes of sea salt, perfect hiding places for raccoons if any animals actually dared to step foot in the cursed places.

The night the children approached the island, there was dim halo of salt just off the coast, particularly strong on the eastern shore that flowed right into the ocean. It was ever shifting as if to call to the visitors. "Something is missing; You are lost."

Once they passed through the hardened barrier, the fleet of children disembarked upon the crispy sand, the soles of their shoes only touching the barest of water. The wind howled, urging them into the first building they came across. Inside were the remains of an old-fashioned ice cream store and the memory of past children who made midnight visits to these very shores. Taking the broken planks of the cabinets and doors with a lighter in one of the boys' pockets, they built a sputtering fire to keep them warm as the first icy wind whipped through the streets. The children huddled on the floor with only ripped-off booth seats to keep them comfortable while they all swapped their legends of the town, stories

that had not been spoken in years. Chance scoffed at most of them, but one caught his ear, like a lost memory that he was trying to replace.

"I heard that, however long ago this was, there was some big pagan ritual on the beach that backfired. They all gathered on the beach to sacrifice their youngest baby to the ocean gods to make the sea full of fish for the year. But then that storm came and washed them all away because they gave the wrong child. I heard there was actually a baby born the day of the ritual and the mom hid it. You don't mess with sea gods, man."

"That is probably the stupidest thing I've ever heard, Barron," another child sneered, causing a ruckus of laughter inside and out of the building. No one noticed the sound over their own noise.

"Only because you've got no imagination. It's like what happened in Oregon last summer," the first boy argued.

"That was a mudslide, you idiot, not a tsunami."

Another chorus of laughter. This time, Chance paused to listen to the deep cackling of the wind in the wooden walls. However, he learned his lesson from before and kept silent. There was no point in getting himself laughed at for creating ghosts out of the sound of wind. Still, he kept his head up, sliding closer to the center of the pack where the only laughter was that of his friends.

"I also heard that the island is cursed and that's why we ain't supposed to be out here. The ocean's still looking for its sacrifice." He turned to the girl on his left and grabbed her waist with a loud Boo! At that same moment, a pair of knocks echoed at the broken door. Everyone went silent as three more knocks sounded.

Suddenly, no one was laughing and a few more were huddled together for the protection of a friend's embrace. Sara slid tighter into her brother's side, giving a rare comfort to his right side, while a

phantom pressure warmed his left. There was no denying this feeling this time, the same presence as that which touched his hand on the trip across. He shied away from Sara, and the cold crept back into his side, leaving a trail of water down his shirt. He didn't remember getting wet. When the knocks stopped coming, there was a bout of nervous giggles and a visible relaxing of tensions. However, anyone who was there that night could assure you that there was no relaxation.

After a few minutes of designated silence where the only sound was the crackle of the dying flames of the last of the campfire, Chance stood up, pulling his sister with him.

"Come on, it's getting late and cold. We should go home now," he declared, looking around for someone to challenge him. Which someone did.

"What, you scared of a little wind, Sparrow?" A girl called Alex sneered, laughing at his caution and inciting a new round of laughs from half of the crowd.

"No!" He backtracked his statement, hating the looks that were sent his way. He never could stand down to a challenge. "But some people have curfews." His eyes darted pointedly to the younger children, most of whom were not even in high school yet. With grumbles of disappointment, the ones who were not old enough returned to the shore, accompanied by the older children who claimed to be chaperoning but were actually scared, too.

One boatful actually made it to shore.

Once they had gone, only six children were left: Chance, Barron, Alex, and three others whose names were not remembered. It was one of those three who brought up a story of the untouched cottage on the northern shore of the island. It was the only part of Cyprus Island that appeared untouched by time and weather. The doors and windows were all locked shut, but the white exterior had a fresh coat of paint and not a single weed grew from the roof. It was, by no means, a beautiful or well-tended property, but

it could easily have been someone's home quite recently. How the child knew of this place, no one questioned, as they were too busy trying to locate it in one of the molded maps from the ice cream counter. It was unmarked.

Still desperate to prove himself to Alex, Chance offered to lead the expedition through the chilling roads to find the place. Like Barron's story, this house felt familiar as well. He didn't take a single wrong turn.

The doors and windows of the house were all locked shut, resisting even the strongest boy's push. As they were beginning to give up the search, one child found a gate to a storm cellar with a rusted lock that snapped under the pressure of a rock. Chance would have sworn he checked there already, but his eyes must have deceived him. As the others joined her, the child to break the lock ventured into the depths of the cellar. When she did not return, the pair of unnamed children followed her. Then the other two until Chance was left on the trimmed lawn with naught but the brutal wind for company. "Something is missing; You are lost," it seemed to hiss, pulling the fearful yet curious boy with it all the way to the water's edge, unbeknownst to him.

"Something is missing; You are lost," he whispered back, still without control of his actions. The ocean smiled back through the dark waves that were forming on its edges. One touch of the angry water and Chance felt safe, at home. He smiled the entire way into the perilous depths.

Three weeks later, the missing person flyers came down from the light posts of Westbrook. The boat of younger children finally reached shore and recounted the events up to their departure on Cyprus Island. The search party of adults that had been deployed found all but one body in the cellar of the old Sparrow home, but the others were nowhere to be seen. The wind looked down on them for three days while they scoured the town for Chance to no avail. At the end of those days, Issa Sparrow heard from the water, "Something is missing; You are lost," and the sound of a baby's cry. *Her* baby's cry.

