

Chapter 3: Small-Town Rumors

Days usually started out cold in Devon Grove, but by midday the sun shone brightly, warming everything to a perfectly mild temperature almost all year round. Today was typical of this time of year, and Mrs. Parker wrapped a light shawl around her shoulders against the brisk morning chill as they started down the steps of their home toward the four-cornered Grove.

The Parkers lived to the east of the Grove, slightly up on the hill where the mornings were a little less foggy and the houses were not as close to together as those that jostled for position on the waterfront. The Parkers liked their space, with Mrs. Parker constantly tending her garden and the small vegetable patch planted on the side of the house.

A typical walk to the edge of the Grove would take ten minutes or so, but today it took longer with all the neighbors out wishing the kids good luck and wishing their parents even better luck---in case their child received a talent that might cause havoc on the family. It was rare these days for a child to be given a powerful talent, but there was still the occasional one that, used in anger, could tear a house down around a family.

The past decade had seen a steady decline in strong talents bestowed on the children. There had been one year, about six years ago, that had produced a number of rare talents. The town had celebrated, overjoyed that the dry spell was over. Unfortunately, that was not the case, because the following year produced the worst showing of talents anyone could remember, with each subsequent year getting steadily worse.

Charlie and Penny walked quickly, avoiding the older neighbors who seemed to gain some morbid pleasure in pinching their cheeks and passing comments such as “How quickly you've grown up” or “I remember when you were still in diapers.” These comments only managed to remind Charlie that he had spent his whole life in this town, even on this same street! He knew little of anything of the outside world apart from what Mrs. Percy, his geography teacher, taught him at school and what he had learned on the Internet.

Devon Grove was a quiet town, nestled between the ocean to the west and the tall Fingers of Heaven mountain range to the east. The temperate climate favored crops such as strawberries, artichokes, lettuce, and cauliflower. Farmers and fisherman alike would sell their goods at the weekly open-air markets held in the town square. On the whole, most residents were born and raised within a dozen miles of the town. Because of the rich natural resources of the region and close community, very few people ever felt the need to venture to the larger cities to the north and south.

“Charlie, look out!” came a scream from behind. With a loud thud, an apple the size of an overinflated basketball crashed to the ground in front of him and started gently rolling down the hill. Charlie looked up to see where the apple had fallen from.

Blinking, he was surprised to see a large black raven, head cocked slightly, studying him intently. If he didn't know better, he would have thought the raven was frowning at him.

"Be careful of the big ones, young lad," Mr. Garrison, the old man who owned the house a few doors down from the Parker's said. "They can knock you clean out and put you in the hospital quick as a flash. You wouldn't want that on your special day, now, would you?"

"Ah...no, sir. Thank you," Charlie replied, looking back up at the tree. He found no sign of the raven that had been there moments ago. He turned back to Mr. Garrison, the giant apple resting under his foot.

"So, what talent do you think you'll get, Charlie?" Mr. Garrison asked, lifting his foot from the apple, letting it start to roll down the street again.

"I...I don't know," Charlie stammered as he watched the apple stop its gentle roll downhill, only to start rolling up the hill and then lift off the ground, hovering level with his head.

"Talents can be wonderful things, you know," Mr. Garrison said as the apple began to rotate in the air. "Me, the day after my Talent Day I found I could do this." With a crooked finger he pointed at the apple, spinning suspended in mid-air. "When I was younger, I could lift a car just by thinking about it, I could. It's a bit more of an effort now, but I am sure I could still do it if the need arises," he sputtered. Then with a wave of his hand, the apple flew across the road, crashing into the trunk of an oak tree and pulverizing it into mush.

"That's amazing!" Charlie stammered. "I never knew you could do that!" he added, after mimicking Mr. Garrison's hand gestures and smiling.

"Yes, I guess it is. If you've never seen the real special talents, then yes I guess it is," he replied, scratching the white stubble at his chin.

"Good morning, Mr. Garrison. Up to your old tricks again, I see," Mrs. Parker grinned. "It's always reassuring to know that there are still those around who remember when special talents were bestowed by the tree. Too often these days we see little of the old magic." She sighed, "Sometimes Nick blames himself, but I often think that some of that magic has just left this world, what with all the environmental problems and troubles overseas."

Forcing a smile, Mrs. Parker looked at Charlie. "Best keep moving, or we will be late." With a pause, she turned up the hill. "Come along Penny, keep up!" Waving, Penny said her goodbyes to Claire Watson, their twelve-year-old neighbor from across the street, and trotted down to catch up with them.

“Good day, Elizabeth,” Mr. Garrison spoke, bowing slightly. “Others blame your husband too,” he whispered under his breath, so softly that Charlie wasn’t sure he had heard it at all. Surprised, he looked at Mr. Garrison, only to see him turn away and head back into his garden, where a rake was busily raking leaves into neat little piles, all by itself.

“Did you know Mr. Garrison could do that?” Charlie asked Penny, pointing to the rake rhythmically moving around the garden collecting leaves as it went.

“I guess so,” Penny replied, “but I never really thought being able to make things move by themselves was that special. At least until now, that is. Talent Day makes you think more about what you could do if you had a talent like that.”

“Yeah it does.” Charlie said excitedly. “It’s like all your Christmases rolled into one! I hope I get something really cool, like being able to fly or breathe underwater.” With arms outstretched, he mimicked an airplane swooping back and forth in the sky. Charlie was as excited as anyone to receive his talent, but it also meant he was one step closer to taking over the responsibility of caring for the Grove. That was something he was not ready for---now or maybe ever.

“More likely a talent to annoy sisters or something,” Penny retorted. “Besides, no one gets good talents anymore anyway. Not since Da---” She stopped in mid-sentence and then continued, “Well, not since a long time anyway.” Finishing quickly, she looked around to see whether their mother had heard any of the conversation. Apparently she hadn’t; she was a few steps ahead, walking with a family friend, Mrs. Abernackle, from a few streets over on Wiltshire.

“Since what, Penny? Since Dad took over the care of the tree?” Charlie hissed. “Mr. Garrison said the same thing. Where did you hear it? What does it mean?”

Penny’s eyes darted around once more, making sure that no one was close enough to hear. “I heard Mom on the phone one time talking to someone on the town council about it. Apparently people have been blaming Dad for the fact that there are no good talents left. They say he has not been caring for the tree like Grandpa used to do. I even heard them say that the town might elect another Keeper if something doesn’t change soon,” Penny finished, almost whispering the last comment.

“That’s crazy!” he spat loud enough to make their mother turn and glare at him, the way mothers do when they want to get your attention from across the room. Gulping, he continued more quietly this time, “The women in the town council are just a bunch of gossipy old biddies with nothing better to do than talk about things they don’t know anything about and should keep out of.”

“Maybe,” Penny added, “but Mrs. Fairweather is supposed to have the talent of telling the future. If she says it’s true, then maybe it is.”

“She is an old sticky beak,” Charlie quipped, grabbing a small apple from the tree as he passed by. “What does she know?” Frustrated, he tossed the apple far ahead where it struck the pavement and splattered across the road.

“Charlie!” Mrs. Parker whipped around. “Enough!”

Penny suppressed a giggle as Charlie apologized to his mother, “Dad says he has a good feeling this year. The apples have been growing well with lots of pretty colors. He even said there was a purple swirl that he hasn’t seen for at least ten years. I wonder whose that will be?”

Charlie, Penny, and their mother walked in silence broken only by the occasional well-wisher or falling apple. More than once, Charlie caught sight of the raven swooping in and out of the trees as if following them down the hill. When he mentioned something about the raven to Penny, she dismissed him with a wave of her hand and a suggestion that he was going crazy and might want to see a doctor about it.

Charlie searched the sky again looking for the raven, but it appeared to have disappeared for now. He was about to give up when he heard shouting coming from just beyond the intersection ahead. Stopping underneath the street sign, Charlie peered down Gravel Lane in search of the voices and saw Gideon Filamore and his father yelling at each other.

“Gideon gives me the creeps.” Penny said, “Come on, let’s go. I don’t want them to catch up with us.”