

Chapter 4: Ceremony in the Square

Before long, Charlie saw the eastern edge of the four-cornered Grove. Although it was never truly out of view from anywhere in Devon Grove, because of the immense size of the Talent Tree positioned at its center, you could not see the surrounding trees and gates until much closer. The Grove itself stretched approximately half a mile in each direction, with the entire area enclosed by an intricate wrought-iron fence. The fence, designed to appear as an extension to the Grove, contained arching branches that intertwined themselves around the fence posts and then stretched out with broad sweeping strokes. The pattern, with its flowing lines, seemed like it was carved out of wood, rather than shaped out of iron.

The fence had been built almost 100 years ago by the Caldwell family whose son, Derek, was given the talent of being able to manipulate iron by running his hand along a pattern and repeating it on unshaped iron pylons. For more than ten years, Derek painstakingly shaped the fence, until finally it was erected: an eternal monument to the gift he had received from within the Grove. But that was not all.

The branches inlaid in the pattern regularly shifted and changed, snaking around the length of the fence. It was as if the tree it was designed to resemble grew and moved with the seasons. Some even reported seeing apples occasionally appear within the ironwork, only to disappear days later. Today hundreds of Devon Grove townsfolk crowded the town square and pressed close against the fence vying for a view of ceremony.

Thirteen children stood in front of the towering double gates, which marked the entrance to the Grove. There was Ashley Croft, a short portly girl with dark chestnut hair; Noam Attleberry, a green-eyed, fair-skinned boy who Charlie often went swimming with on the weekends in summer; Ted Pearson, with his sun-bleached blonde hair, Nicholas Mills, the school's aspiring sports prodigy; Tara Gessup, one of Penny's friends who regularly stayed over at their house; Malcolm Jackson, dark-skinned and the tallest in class; Margaret Shaw, with fiery red hair; Roland Wick, who lived in a large mansion in the hills; Teah Chong, with her exotic appearance marking her as part of one of the few outside families to settle in Devon Grove; Jason Paxton, the boy Charlie thought was most likely to be locked up by the time he was eighteen; Gideon Filamore; Penny; and Charlie.

Ahead of the crowd, between Charlie and the gate, an ornately carved pedestal stood approximately 4 feet high. The dark, rich-looking wood had been painstakingly carved to represent the giant trunk of the Talent Tree with delicate figures of children climbing up every side toward the canopy above. The broad base resembled waves crashing against the trunk and added to the masterfully crafted piece's sense of grandeur. Resting atop the pedestal was a round glass bowl that glinted in the morning light, catching the rays as the sun began to peek through the morning fog. One small red envelope for each of the eligible children had been placed within the bowl in preparation.

Excitement rippled through the crowd as Mrs. Fairweather leaned on her cane and moved slowly to stand directly behind the bowl and pedestal. She wore a long, dark brown robe tied at the waist with a cord of golden rope that ended in small tassels that swayed as she moved. Despite her title of *Mrs.*, she had never been married. Now she was elderly, and her once-black hair had long since turned gray and hung in a braid that ended in the small of her back. Pausing momentarily to let the excited murmurs fade away, she raised both arms in a gesture that encompassed the crowd in front of her.

“People of Devon Grove, we have come together for a tradition that stretches back for many generations. Today our children will become part of this great town. Today they will enter the magical Grove and receive their talents. As was, as is, and as will be, six children shall enter the Grove at a time. I, as the head of the town council, shall draw names from the bowl.” She motioned with her hand toward the bowl in front of her. “Once six are called, they shall enter. Only when they return shall we call forth the next six until there are no more. That is the birthright of one born in Devon Grove.”

With the wave of her cane, a flash of light erupted from its end, shooting brightly colored fireworks high into the air. The fireworks crackled and boomed, sending sparks twinkling downward like falling stars, as the colors faded from view. The crowd erupted in cheers, elation sweeping over them as they surged forward, eager to glimpse the names as they were drawn. Charlie eagerly shuffled forward, closer to the other children, as his mother pushed gently on his and Penny's back. He could barely contain his excitement now.

Mrs. Fairweather lowered her arms and reached into the bowl, the sleeve of her robe falling down over her hand. She swirled the contents and with her thumb and forefinger and gripped one, raising it from the bowl. Carefully folding back the red paper, she read the name silently to herself before pronouncing loudly, “Ted Pearson.”

Charlie watched as Ted strode forward confidently, his shoulder-length, sandy blonde hair swaying as he high-fived Malcolm and waved at the crowd. Tanned and muscular from hours on the beach, Ted was very popular with the girls. His best clothes apparently consisted of blue jeans and a striped polo shirt of alternating shades of brown. Charlie was envious of his comfortable clothes as he pulled at the collar of his stiff white shirt. Ted finished sashaying across the square and stopped beside Mrs. Fairweather, waving a fist in the air, obviously pleased to be selected first.

The elderly council woman nodded gently, acknowledging Ted's presence. Lifting the red envelope that contained his name on it level to her face, she blew on it and released her hold. The envelope began to glide to the ground but then changed shape into a small butterfly, its orange wings covered with small black spots. The butterfly fluttered carelessly into the sky and over the iron fence surrounding the Grove.

“One child to set the course,” she said ceremoniously, before placing her hand back into the bowl and retrieving the next envelope. “Margaret Shaw, please come forward.”

Teah Chong hugged Margaret briefly, wishing her luck as she hesitantly moved forward, her hands thrust into the pockets of the blue knitted cardigan she wore over a plaid skirt that stopped just short of her knees. Hiding behind her long red, curly hair, she kept her eyes downcast as she crossed the square. Standing beside Ted, Margaret shuffled nervously, a stark contrast to his exuberant self-confidence.

Crowds were definitely not Margaret’s thing. Charlie knew from school that right about now she would probably prefer to be invisible or lost in reading a book rather than standing next to Ted with the town’s attention directed on her. He liked Margaret; she shared his same longing to explore, although she was too shy to actually act upon it. The few times he and Margaret had spoken in the library, she was enthralled by his descriptions of his adventures hiking and the wildlife he had seen.

Mrs. Fairweather released the envelope from her hand, the butterfly circling Margaret’s head before floating across the fence into the Grove. “Two children to name it true.”

She reached for another name and read aloud, “Penelope Parker.”

Penny and Ashley squealed as they jumped up and down in small excited hops before she hurriedly moved forward. “Good luck, my dear,” Mrs. Parker said, lovingly blowing a kiss to Penny as she crossed the square waving to her friends. Standing beside Margaret, she gently gripped the hem of her floral dress and offered a slight curtsy to Mrs. Fairweather, who nodded in return.

“Your sister looks happy, doesn’t she, Charlie?” Mrs Parker said, patting him on the shoulder, pride bringing tears to her eyes.

“Mrs. Fairweather called her Penelope. I bet she hated that.” No one called her Penelope unless she is in trouble or when he wanted to tease her.

“Hush, not today, okay?” She dabbed the corner of her eyes with a small white handkerchief.

“Three children to journey forward.” Mrs. Fairweather spoke as the red envelope became a butterfly drifting away in the breeze. Reaching into the bowl again and drew the next name, “Gideon Filamore.”

“Stop it, all right? Leave me alone!” Gideon said angrily, pushing away from his father as he was shoved roughly forward toward to Mrs. Fairweather and the bowl. Brushing his dark, oily hair from his eyes, Gideon glowered around before shuffling

forward and taking his place beside Penny while picking at his fingernails, trying to remove some unseen speck of dirt.

“Four children, souls of the Grove,” Mrs. Fairweather intoned, letting the envelope turn into a butterfly that fluttered toward Gideon before taking a wide berth around him and into the Grove. She drew the next envelope, “Nicholas Mills.”

“Yes!” came an excited response as Nicholas, the school's all-around sports star, walked forward. He wore a casual shirt and well-pressed slacks and practically dripped with self-assurance. Even at thirteen he was the school's most promising athlete. No matter what sport it was, as long as it had a ball he was good at it---very good.

Not many people left Devon Grove, but Nicholas had the drive and dedication that would land him an Ivy League scholarship. Nicholas and his mother had been involved in a serious car crash a few years ago that threatened to put an end to his sporting career before it had even started, but Nicholas' determination saw him recover with barely a scar to show for it.

Nicholas high-fived Ted as he passed him before taking his place at the end of the line. The two boys were inseparable; even their houses were across the street from each other. Charlie sometimes wondered what the boys saw in each other. Ted was laid-back and carefree and took the world as it came, while Nicholas was focused and always had something to do or somewhere to be. The rare times when Nicholas did not have practice, he and Ted would always be down at the beach searching for the perfect wave.

“Five children who know what they must do.”

Charlie scanned the faces of the children picked so far. All of them carried a hint of fear and uncertainty, but he could see they also were filled with excitement about the possibilities the day would bring. His eyes finally fell on Mrs. Fairweather, who had her hand in the bowl again. He watched as she tumbled the red envelopes over and over, the arm of her robe hanging long around her wrist. Her fingers settled on an envelope, caressed it, and then released it before finally settling on another. Drawing her hand from the bowl, she held the last envelope.

“Charles Parker, will you come forward?”

“Oh my gosh, Charlie, both you and Penny together and in the first group! Your father will be so surprised.” Mrs. Parker hugged Charlie before urging him forward, “Now go, go, hurry.”

He moved forward a broad smile on his face. This was really it. He was going to get his talent today. Crossing the square, he waved at the crowd noticing Noam's face, who looked disappointed he was not selected in the first group. Letting his hand drop,

he stopped beside Nicholas who gave him a firm slap on the back. "All right Parker, let's do this."

"Six children, united as one."

"The six have been chosen." Mrs Fairweather turned from the crowd toward the children. "We send you forth into the Grove to receive what is rightfully yours. You enter as the children of your parents, but you leave as the children of the trees." She tapped her cane again, and more fireworks shot skyward booming overhead.

Clapping and cheering spread through the crowd like wildfire on a dry summer's day. The atmosphere was electric. Raising a hand, the crowd fell silent as Mrs. Fairweather continued, "When you enter the Grove, we will draw the next six names and will wait your safe return. Good luck to you all. Now please step up to the gate."

Charlie and the others stepped forward into the empty space directly in front of the gate. Turning his head, he scanned the faces of the kids who were not selected; they looked disappointed but knew it was only a matter of time until it was their turn. Only Jason, with his short spiky hair and thick neck, looked ready to bite someone's head off for not being selected. *It will be his turn soon*, Charlie thought and turned his attention back to the others and the Grove.

They stood staring deep into the Grove, uncertainly. It was not as if the Grove was particularly frightening; in fact, it looked almost serene and peaceful. But he couldn't help feeling nervous. Dust particles glinted in the shards of light that filtered through the scattering of clouds that added to the magical atmosphere. The beams of light crisscrossed the floor of the Grove, bathing much of the entrance in early-morning shadows. A few clouds congregated directly above the tall limbs of the Talent Tree, which loomed over the canopies of the other trees in the Grove and gave off a sense of foreboding that made Charlie shiver.

He was just being silly. Every year the ceremony was the same: children went in, retrieved their apple, and came home. There was nothing to it, really, but standing in front of those gigantic gates staring into the trees, there was an eerie sense of finality that he couldn't shake. Growing up in Devon Grove, you always knew this day was coming. But today, all the dreaming and anticipation came down to right now.

With a start, he came back to his senses and surprisingly found Penny gripping his hand so furiously he was afraid she might crush it. He squeezed back; now was not the time for teasing. "Don't worry, Pen; Dad will be with us," he said soothingly and squeezed again in a reassuring gesture he hoped would help. With a small smile, she looked at him as if to say thank you and began walking toward the large iron gate.