

THE GENIES OF ASHENMOOR

THE LAST LAMP



JACKSON PORTER & IVY RUSSELL

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CONTENTS



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1. [The Rain Gutter of the Barron Museum of Curiosities](#)
 2. [The Security Measures of the Barron Museum of Curiosities](#)
 3. [The Beginning](#)
 4. [The Tree Hollow](#)
 5. [The Truth about Grovel](#)
 6. [Dissimulo](#)
 7. [The Noiseless Dungeon and the Hollow-Eyed Man](#)
 8. [Crawl](#)
 9. [Min'asma](#)
 10. [The Calling Rock](#)
 11. [The Yearmid Celebration](#)
 12. [The Arakorse](#)
 13. [The Cinderstorm](#)
 14. [Etched in Stone](#)
 15. [The Vonderist](#)
 16. [The Goptri](#)
 17. [The Mumbling Map](#)
 18. [The Destruction of Merenuverum](#)
 19. [Cornelius](#)
 20. [Reclaimed](#)
 21. [Dark Kloud](#)

22. [We Have To](#)
23. [The Sunken Gloom](#)
24. [The Bizarre Bazaar](#)
25. [The Floating Door](#)
26. [Thallius](#)
27. [A Difference of Worlds](#)
28. [Acknowledgments](#)
29. [About the Authors](#)

CHAPTER ONE

THE RAIN GUTTER OF THE BARRON MUSEUM OF CURIOSITIES



“In the end, it is memory which remains our greatest ally.”

—Taken from the journal of Vox, the Silverlight King

I WAS BREAKING INTO A MUSEUM.

Well . . . “breaking in” sounded so illegal. Let’s say I was visiting after hours. Yeah, that sounded better.

The police, however, did not see it that way, which was why they were gathered below me, training a spotlight directly on my back. Normally, I wouldn’t mind the attention, but it was starting to heat up, which was a bad idea, considering I wasn’t a frozen burrito. My name was Gabriel Barron II. I was a somewhat idiotic twelve-year-old who, ironically, smelled like burritos.

And I had one goal: climb to the balcony on the third floor, get inside, and find the clue I knew existed that would lead me to my missing parents.

“Come down *now*,” the policeman stressed, his voice amplified by a megaphone.

“I can’t!” I shouted back.

“Why’s that?” the policeman asked, sounding bored.

“If I climb down, I’ll be going the wrong direction!”

The policeman sighed. I knew this because the megaphone was still on, and despite having scaled halfway up the back of the museum with nothing

but my hands, feet, and the rain gutter (it sounds more impressive than it looked, I promise), I could hear it as clear as the wind beating in my ears.

Also, I knew what the sigh meant. I could understand sighs as well as I could understand a short list of instructions. The policeman was disappointed in me. I couldn't blame him. I was a little disappointed in myself too. This wasn't the first time I'd been caught in a situation like this, and it wouldn't be the last . . . unless I fell.

Nope. Couldn't think about that. I liked not being shaped like a pancake.

I continued climbing, the rain gutter smooth and frigid in my hands.

The cops would be fine. They had nothing to worry about. My uncle Atticus owned the museum. Sure, Atticus had forbidden me from visiting it at night, but . . . oh. Okay. I was no longer breaking in or visiting after hours; I was doing *reconnaissance*.

Oh, loopholes, how I love you.

"Come down now," the cop ordered again, as if saying it for the twelfth time in a row would convince me to obey. (Plot twist: it would not.)

I paused my climb and looked over my shoulder at the three policemen far, far below. I shook my head, stealing a quick glance at the tree line ten feet behind them. My best friend, Simon, was well hidden in the shadows. Hopefully, he wouldn't get caught, but that was like wishing to have a pet T. rex. It would sadly never happen.

I continued my climb, which was tricky, considering the rain gutter was as unhelpful as the many wishes I'd made for a pet T. rex.

My arms began cramping, and my legs grew tired. The threat of falling had never felt so close. Good news though: the balcony was only three feet above me. Atticus never locked that door, so it was my best shot at getting inside, and I had been trying to get inside for a long time. So long that it made me hungry just thinking about it. Hungry for burritos.

That spotlight was starting to get *really* warm.

I climbed some more, ignoring the burning in my biceps, focusing on my goal.

"Gabriel!"

Come on, I thought, peering over my shoulder once again.

A new adult had joined the police, but this one looked less like a policeman and more like a scarecrow. Atticus was taller than everyone else, and he had red hair that stuck straight out like straw.

“Get down here right now!” Atticus demanded, pointing at me.

I sighed. The ruse was up. The cops had outsmarted me yet again. Even if I got to the balcony this instant, Atticus could be inside and up to his office in under two minutes. That would leave me, like, thirty seconds of sleuthing. And the only thing of worth I’d ever accomplished in thirty seconds was chugging a gallon of milk. (It’d been a dare from Simon. And yes, I threw up immediately afterward.)

“Fine!” I shouted as I began inching higher. See, here’s the thing about me. I know the things I sometimes do are stupid, but I can’t stop myself. It wasn’t that I *wanted* to scale this building free solo, but I was convinced beyond doubt that a clue existed up there, and this was the only way to get there.

I paused. I was tired. Climbing the gutter had been more work than it’d looked, but I couldn’t slow down. I’d look like a weakling to all those adults gathered below. The least I could do was succeed at disobeying.

So I did what I did best: stalled.

“What’ll happen to me if I come down?” I asked.

Atticus didn’t respond right away; instead, he conversed with the police below, their voices muffled. Then Atticus’s voice came back over the megaphone. “You know what’s gonna happen, buddy.”

“I’m not really interested in getting grounded right now,” I said. Some strength was returning to my arms. I wouldn’t need to stall much longer.

“Well, maybe you should have considered that before trying to break into a museum you’re free to enter during the day.”

Creceaaakkk.

My head snapped to the source of the noise.

The rain gutter was beginning to pull away from the wall.

Panicking, I scrambled up the gutter, toward the balcony, my palms sweating.

Creceaaakkk.

And that was that. The useless rain gutter gave up. It snapped off the wall and began falling away. I was at least twenty-five feet above the ground. If I fell, I wouldn’t just be a pancake anymore; I’d become flatter than a piece of paper.

So I jumped.

Well, it was less of a jump and more of yanking myself upward in hopes of grabbing the balcony. Which I did. I managed to latch onto the edge, only my fingers holding me up.

Panic ensued beneath me. The police began scrambling, shouting orders, and speaking into their radios. Atticus was saying something into the megaphone, but I couldn't hear him at first. Blood thundered in my ears.

"Hold on!" Atticus shouted, his voice slicing through.

The wind whipped me, and I clung to the balcony like it was the last burrito left on Earth.

Below, the police raced to finish unfolding what appeared to be a net big enough that it could catch me and all of my crushed dreams.

I didn't do well with fear, if you couldn't tell. I usually pretended I wasn't feeling it, which meant I easily convinced myself to do stupid things like climb the rain gutter of the Barron Museum of Curiosities. However, while hanging there from the balcony with no way to go but down, my sweaty fingers slowly slipping, the fear broke through like water rushing out of a dam.

I screamed.

Then I slipped and entered free-fall. I regretted trying to break into the museum. I hoped Simon wasn't watching. He didn't need to see me become a puddle.

But all of the fear and regret immediately went away, because I stopped plummeting to my death. Someone had snatched my hand.

Atticus was leaning over the balcony, his face as red as his hair, grasping me with both hands.

"Look at that!" I said, smiling. "You saved me!"

Atticus heaved. I grasped the edge of the balcony with my free hand, hoisting myself up as Atticus pulled me over the railing. My uncle stumbled back, hitting the other side of the balcony as I fell to the floor. He jumped up, dusting himself off.

We stood in silence for a second, both panting for different reasons. Then Atticus leaned over the edge and shouted, "It's all right! Thanks, Officers! I've got it from here."

The police grumbled, their words jumbled by the time they reached my ears. Judging by their tones, they were complaining.

"What were you thinking?" Atticus asked, two eyes and one finger pointing at me.

“I was thinking that being trapped under that spotlight must be what a burrito feels like in a microwave. Hot. Inescapable.”

“Not funny,” Atticus said with a deepening frown. A loud click clapped through the night, and the spotlight switched off. It was dark now, with some light coming from the stars and the moon. “Now, what were you *really* thinking, and don’t be smart with me.”

I shivered. Atticus had a crazed-scientist look about him when he got angry. He would probably look less crazy with gray hair, but when I’d suggested that to him, he’d given me a two-minute-and-thirty-second rant about the strength and long life of his red hair. Besides, Atticus was no scientist. He was a museum curator, which was the most boring job in the world.

“I was trying to get in here to look for clues,” I said, pressured to answer under his hard stare.

“Clues?” Atticus asked incredulously. He stepped forward, the moon behind him casting a long shadow over me. “For your parents?”

I nodded.

“There are no clues in my office,” Atticus said. “I can assure you of that.”

“How would you know?” I asked, stepping forward as fury burned under my skin. (I avoided fear like the plague, but rage was an emotion I knew well.) “You can barely remember them, Atticus, but that doesn’t change the fact that I *do* remember them. I know they’re out there somewhere, and I *know* there’s a way to find out where they went.”

“Why do you think my office has a clue, hm?”

“Because it’s the only place in this dumb museum that I haven’t seen. They owned half this museum, remember? There *has* to be something about their disappearance somewhere in there.”

“I know it’s hard growing up without parents,” Atticus said, dropping his voice. “I know it’s hard accepting that they left when you were a baby, but I’ve told you *repeatedly* that you’re not allowed in there. You have the whole rest of the museum, the manor, and the manor grounds. You—”

“*Why* won’t you let me in there?” I asked. I tried taking a deep breath to calm my thudding heart, but it was useless.

“Because I have personal items in there, not to mention the rarities, collectibles, and—most emphatically—fragile objects. No, no, no,” he said,

waving his finger when I opened my mouth. “A twelve-year-old boy and fragile objects are not compatible.”

“I haven’t broken anything in the museum,” I said, scoffing.

“Yeah?”

“Name one,” I challenged.

Atticus pointed over my shoulder, and when I turned, I saw a light streak along the wall where the rain gutter had been.

“I said I haven’t broken anything *in* the museum, not *on* the museum.

“You’re grounded,” Atticus said. “No TV for a month. And I know Simon’s hiding in the trees. I saw him when I was down there. Feel free to tell him I’m calling his parents first thing in the morning.”

“You can’t be serious,” I said. “He didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I’ll let his parents be the judges of that,” Atticus said. He pulled off his blue necktie, untied it, and handed it to me.

“What’s this for?” I asked.

“Blindfold,” Atticus explained. “Tie it around your eyes.”

“Wh—”

“If I let you look in the office while we’re passing through, then what’s the point of punishing you? I’ve told you not to go snooping in here, and today isn’t going to be the day I allow you to. Now, hurry. I want to get home and go to sleep.” He paused, waiting for me to begin tying the blindfold. “If I catch you peeking, you won’t be allowed to see any friends for the rest of the summer. Capisce?”

“Capisce,” I groaned.

Reluctantly, I tied the blindfold around my eyes. Once I was finished, Atticus grabbed my arm and stepped inside his office. I kept my eyes closed. I wasn’t going to risk peeking. If I got grounded from hanging out with Simon, I’d go insane.

Atticus guided me through the office, through another door, and then instructed me to remove the blindfold.

I didn’t bother looking up as we navigated the hallways and elevator, eventually arriving at the front door. Instead, I kept my eyes on the key card dangling from Atticus’s belt loop. When we exited through the front door, I casually bumped into Atticus, then stepped away, apologizing.

Atticus hadn’t seemed to notice.

I quickly slipped the key card into my pocket.

Tonight, I was coming back to the museum.

Because Atticus was wrong. He didn't remember.

I *had* known my parents. They'd been raising me until a year ago, until they'd randomly disappeared. And Atticus wasn't the only one forgetting things about them.

As we rounded the museum to retrieve Simon, I pulled out the only photo I had of my parents.

My dad, a six-and-a-half-foot Irishman who was closer to the size of a bear than a man, and my mom, a five-foot-nothing Arabian with chestnut-brown skin and long, black hair, had nothing physically in common whatsoever. Still, they shared one thing: big, gleaming smiles. In the photo, they stood in front of my childhood home, their arms around each other. I was a mixture of the two, at least that's what people used to tell me. Half-Arabian, half-Irish, and standing just a head taller than my mom, I had my mother's eyes and hair but shared my father's face shape.

What once had been a pristine reminder of them had now become a puzzle. Parts of the photograph were fading, and as I stared at it, a million questions circling my mind, I wasn't surprised to see my parents' faces begin to blur, erasing their mouths and noses, leaving only their eyes, which had already started to fade.

I *had* to get into that museum. I was running out of time.

Because even I was beginning to forget them.

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