

Marie's life was turned upside down when her dad was transferred to the new Ford plant in Greenbrook Crossings in June. It was a quaint Midwestern town with lots of big trees and parks and places to go, but it felt odd and unfamiliar. It wasn't easy moving to another state and starting all over. She was actually glad that her mom had enrolled her in the "Acting Up" summer camp up at the new middle school. At least she would have a chance to get to know a few neighborhood kids before heading off to sixth grade in the fall.

Marie met Alison and Lane at the drama camp, and the three girls clicked right away. They all loved art and music and acting, and they were all new to the area. Alison looked younger than eleven. She was short, built like a gymnast, with a sweet round face and light green eyes. Her thick, shoulder length blond hair was loose and messy most of the time. She hated to brush it, unlike Marie, whose long, honey blond hair was usually kept in a tidy French braid. Alison's mom had moved her and her big brother to Greenbrook Crossings to live with their grandma after her parents had divorced. For such a little girl, Alison was certainly the loudest, most outgoing of the three, and clearly the leader of the pack.

Lane was slim and pretty with fair skin and freckles. She had soft brown hair with bouncy curls, but her deep blue eyes were her most endearing quality. She was taller than Alison, but not quite as tall as Marie. Lane was fun and free spirited and always coming up with quirky jokes and silly things to do. Her mom said she needed to be an actress, not just because she could sing like a bird, but because she was always off in her own make believe world. Her dad was also transferred to Greenbrook Crossings for his new job back in the spring, so she had to spend the remainder of her fifth grade year being home schooled with her younger brother. She was so glad that was over with and excited to finally meet some kids her own age. She looked forward to walking to the brand new Madeline Marble Middle school only a few blocks away; she never liked having to take the bus to her old school.

Marie was quiet and more reserved than the other two. She was soft spoken, kind, and very smart. She was the youngest of the three, just having turned eleven that June,

but she was quite a bit taller than the other two. She had pretty brown eyes, a charming smile, and a great sense of humor. Even though she was a bit shy, she seemed to make friends easily. Her mom thought that the drama camp would help get her out of her shell and be a great introduction to the new school. Its focus was heavy on the performing arts, and they had all heard that the autumn harvest play was a very big deal every year in the little town. Anyone who wanted a part in it had to commit to the summer camp. Marie didn't resist, she knew it would be easier to face middle school if she had a few friends. She liked the thought of being part of the cool drama club. They were doing a modern adaptation of "Snow White" called "Snow White and the Seven Sprites" where the dwarves are replaced with girls called sprites. They were very funny and animated. It was more of a modern day comedy, but still had all the scary parts. She and Lane were chosen to be "townspeople," who mostly sang and danced a few numbers, but Alison landed the role of a funny little sprite named Mighty.

The girls would meet in the mornings and walk to and from the new school, cutting through the park at the edge of their neighborhood practicing their lines and songs, enjoying each others' company. Before long, they were the best of friends. Greenbrook Park was beautiful. It had big play areas with climbing structures, slides and swings, a tennis court, and a big covered shelter with picnic tables and grills. It even had drinking fountains and bathrooms. The park was surrounded by woods with tall, majestic trees, winding bike trails, and a crystal clear creek that ran all the way along the edge down to the big river. Every day they looked forward to spending their long summer days together: exploring, playing, and telling all their stories and secrets to one another. Until the day they spotted the little house.

They walked a long way through the woods looking for just the right spot to build a fort and to hide from the annoying neighborhood boys who were following them around, especially Jacob Jenson-O'Reilly. He was eleven too. He was Alison's next door neighbor and her brother's new best bud, both proving to be a big giant pain in her you know what. The girls tried to ditch them every chance they could and found themselves going past the creek, deeper and deeper into the woods, to find some space of their own.

They could hear a faint twinkling sound. Then they saw it. A lonely looking little house: hidden deep within the woods. It was stained a dark shade of brown and looked almost like a little cabin. The porch stretched all across the front of it, covered by a slanted, shingled roof. There was a rickety, old wooden rocking chair on one side with a broom perched next to it and a big wicker basket full of wood. A silver and crystal wind chime hung in the corner making the soft, eerie, twinkling sound like one you'd hear in a scary movie. The tiny house had an ominous feeling about it, but the worst part was seeing the creepy shrunken head with its piercing violet eyes and wild black hair sprouting from its shriveled little scalp. There it was, all alone, swaying in the breeze on the other side of the porch.

As the summer days melted away, the girls found themselves sneaking off to their hideout more and more; curiosity outweighing fear as they tried to get a better view of who occupied the odd little house with the strange swinging head. They made a cozy fort in a quiet little spot in the middle of a thick patch of bushes. It was cave-like, but they could see out perfectly, and no one could see in. They made it their home away from home. They brought a couple of blankets and old cushions, and sometimes they stashed a few toys and dolls there so they could play after camp. They would bring snacks and water bottles or juice bags and their scripts to practice their lines. Every day was an adventure in their strange new surroundings.

One day the front door to the little house swung open and out stepped an older woman wearing an ankle length black skirt and a thin black shawl draped around her shoulders. She had long grayish black hair that made her look a bit like the scary troll that hung on the porch. They could hear her chanting and murmuring as they watched her dance around the yard, waving her hands in the air, whispering to the wind and the trees as if they were people.

The old woman would come outside almost every evening that summer at about the same time. As the sun would start to fade, she carefully lit the fire and watched as it crackled and burned, the purple and green flames hypnotizing the girls as they spied from behind the trees and bushes. Some days she would read a page or two from a worn leather binder and then toss it into the fire. Other days she would sing and chant while the girls strained their ears to understand her ... "shroud thy cloak in the black of night, a blast of

wind, a scream of fright. Begin thy magic.” They were mesmerized by the sound of the old crone and her spells, but the girls knew that they had to be home before dark. It was hard to sneak away without fear of disturbing her nightly ritual.

One day the woman was especially entertaining dancing her voodoo dance around the yard, when suddenly Lane let out a screech! She startled the old woman who quickly began to run toward them, waving her long wooden stick, scolding them for trespassing. The girls were horrified. They ran like banshees to get out of there.

Lane felt awful that she had let the big hairy spider frighten her so. But it was crawling up her leg, and it really could have been a tarantula. She felt as though she had ruined all the fun they were having. For a few days, the three friends barely spoke. But soon Alison convinced them that they had to go back to their fort. Her favorite doll was stranded there, and she had to go get it. They were scared but couldn’t wait to go back. They knew they would only be able to stay a little while and then would probably have to say goodbye to their secret fort for good. It was just too risky to keep going back since they’d been found out.

They made their way down the secret path to their special hiding place inside the patch of bushes. They were shocked to see that all their belongings had been confiscated. Everything was gone. It hadn’t even occurred to them that the old witch would take their stuff. Alison was beside herself. Her grandmother had given her the precious American Girl doll three Christmases ago, and she couldn’t bear to tell her that she had carelessly left her in the wilderness to die. She was so angry that she stormed up to the old woman’s porch and began pounding on the door. She yelled, demanding that the woman come out and give her the doll back! Lane and Marie were petrified. They pleaded with Alison to let it go; she was scaring them. But Alison was fuming. She stomped around the tiny house, jumping up and down, trying to get a glimpse inside the windows to see if she could spot her special Ruthie doll or the old woman. She even tried the doorknob to see if the house was unlocked. Lane and Marie insisted that Alison stop her ridiculous behavior and threatened to leave without her. Finally, Alison agreed to go, but not before she decided to get even. She told her friends that two could play at this game as she climbed up onto the porch railing and unhooked the hanging troll head. The other girls screamed for her to leave it alone and then they ran and ran until they were all out of breath. They

reached the park and collapsed on the picnic tables, Alison clutching the strange looking shrunken head in her hands. It looked even more frightening up close, and it had an odd inscription carved into the bottom: *Tueri dominus, ceteris ira*. They had no idea what it meant, but it sounded creepy.

Every time the girls tried to get together since the crazy “head stealing” incident something drastic would happen. First, Lane’s dog went missing for two days. She cried buckets. The dog had never been away from home. They searched for hours and hours. Everyone was so worried, but all along poor Panda was locked up in Lane’s attic. But how did she get up there? The only way up was to climb the drop down ladder from the ceiling. How could the tiny ten pound Papillion have gotten up there all by herself? Lane was convinced it had something to do with the hideous head. Not long after, the teenage neighbor boy’s boa constrictor magically escaped and all the parents on the block were in a big frenzy about it for days. Finally it was found, all coiled up on Marie’s patio where the girls were hanging out. Everyone on the whole block could hear their bloodcurdling screams, but no one could figure out how on earth that huge snake got out of its cage.

Lane and Marie tried to convince Alison to take the scary troll head back, but she refused. She said it was a bargaining chip to get her American Girl doll back. They were already paranoid, but when Alison invited the girls to the last summer sleepover, it was the final straw. They brought their sleeping bags and pillows and settled down in Alison’s big, drafty bedroom. A storm was brewing: rumbling thunder, lightning bolts stabbing through the blinds, pouring rain pounding against the window panes. It was perfect sleepover weather.

They practiced their songs and dance steps and helped Alison memorize her lines as *Mighty, the sprite*. A new school year was starting. Opening night was in two short weeks! They were so excited. But first, they had to deal with the creepy head issue. They decided to research the peculiar saying on the bottom of its rubbery, wrinkled neck. Marie had it written down in a notebook in her backpack: *Tueri dominus; ceteris ira*. They lay on the bed and surfed the internet on Alison’s laptop. They took turns in between eating and singing and talking about Jacob Jenson- O’Reilly and his loyal army of followers and what classes they might have to suffer together. In the midst of their fun, Lane’s face turned a ghostly shade of white. She began to read the English translation

of the Latin words on the old woman's doll head. Finally, she squeaked out, "Protect the Master; to all others my wrath.

Marie had had enough. Shivers ran up her spine. The thunder was roaring. The electricity in Alison's grandma's old house was flickering on and off. Lane sat silently on the bed, still pale and reeling from the harsh words written on the old woman's omen doll. They knew that they had to return it quickly. Alison finally agreed. She didn't want the negativity anymore.

They grabbed flashlights and went down to the garage to retrieve the shrunken head from the rusty tool chest where she had hidden it, but it was gone. Alison was having an anxiety attack, recklessly searching the garage, when her brother began yelling for her. Her mom was on the phone; their grandma was in the emergency room at the hospital.

Alison's poor gram had fallen at the movie theater and injured her hip. Alison cried and cried. She blamed herself for bringing the wrath of the evil doll head on to her family and friends. The old witch had cursed her.

The girls spent the whole week before school at the hospital. Alison told her grandma all about losing her precious American Girl doll, how sorry she was, and how it was all her fault that she had fractured her hip. She was too afraid to tell her the part about actually stealing the shrunken hexing head from the house in the woods. She had to find it and return it to its rightful owner soon, or the curse would never end. Her grandma looked so frail, but she told Alison to stop talking such nonsense, that she had simply tripped and fallen off the curb.

Days were flying by. School had begun. Everyone was busy with new classes, new friends, too much homework, and the play rehearsals. They were all so happy when Alison's grandma told them she was feeling well enough to come to the play. It was opening that weekend. The three friends were all nervous wrecks trying not to think about the missing head and how it had just vanished. The dress rehearsal was Friday after school, and they needed to focus. They were all so excited.

That Friday morning, Marie scrambled to her locker before first hour, and when the wild shrunken head with the violet eyes tumbled out on top of her, she nearly had a heart attack! Just then Jacob Jensen-O'Reilly snapped a picture of her with his iTouch

and told her that the look on her face was priceless. All of his bratty buddies were laughing and high fiving him. She heard him say that he and Alison's brother had found the creepy thing in the garage. She turned eight shades of red, quickly stuffed the head back in, and ran off to class. She was afraid to go back to her locker all day.

After school, Marie met up with Lane and Alison in the auditorium and told them about Jacob Jensen O'Reilly having the stupid troll head all along. They were so relieved and yet steaming mad at the same time. Alison wanted to return it to the old woman right away and get it over with, but they didn't have enough time. She would do it later, and she would deal with that brother of hers later, too. He was in for it. They had to get dressed for the play rehearsal, but first she wanted to get the shrunken head out of Marie's locker and keep it with her so that it wouldn't disappear again. The three ran quickly down the sixth grade hall. Marie unlocked her locker, her hands shaking at the thought of seeing the freakish thing fall out again. She didn't expect to see Alison's American Girl doll shoved in the locker beside the troll. How did those boys keep getting in to her locker anyway? They were all stunned. Alison was so confused. Was it Jacob Jensen- O'Reilly and his gang of thugs, including her very own brother, the despicable thieves who stole her precious doll as well? She didn't know what to think. They had no time because they had to hurry up and get to the play rehearsal.

As they were getting their costumes and make up on, Marie and Lane were flashing back to their fort in the woods. They remembered the annoying boys following them around, which is why they kept going further into the forest in the first place. So while the girls were spying on the old woman in the little house, they realized that they were being spied on by the boys all along. It all made sense. Those sneaky scoundrels knew where their fort was, and they must have taken all their stuff!

The curtain rose. Mrs. Pringle the drama teacher introduced the play to the audience full of parents and teachers and classmates. They were all invited to see the dress rehearsal for free. She wanted to give a special thanks to everyone involved in the wonderful, clever adaptation of Snow White. She thanked the costume and set designers, and the orchestra for the beautiful musical scores. She wanted to thank the cast and crew for all their hard work, and she especially wanted to dedicate this amazing performance to the author, composer, and producer: Miss Madeline Marble. She helped the old crone up on to the stage. The girls almost fainted. It was her.