



**SECRET
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McKenzie



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For Kate Elliott

WILLOW

It's the second time I've had the feeling in as many hours . . .

Someone is watching me.

A shiver runs down my spine as I peer through the living-room window. The earlier drizzle has stopped, but the pavement outside still glistens with rain. I stare at the hedge that runs along the side of our front yard. I have this horrible sense someone is lurking among the dark, gleaming leaves.

Which is ridiculous.

There's nobody there.

I shift my gaze to my reflection in the window. Even in the haze of the glass, I can tell that my arms are too angular, sticking awkwardly out of my blue top. I don't really like this top, but one of the cool boys at school once said it was the same colour as my eyes, so maybe it suits me more than I think. I peer more closely at the glass and sigh, smoothing back a strand of fine, frizzy hair.

'Willow! Ah, there you are!' Dad calls from the

doorway. ‘Can you help me with my work email? My phone seems to have locked me out.’

‘Again?’ I make a face, then follow him into the kitchen. Dad is the most un-techy man in the world. He’s a financial adviser, and when he had to start using video calls during the pandemic, I honestly thought he might have to give up work, he found it so stressful. But he kept going and he’s actually quite good at IT stuff now. He still says he can’t be doing with most social media, but he does use old things like Facebook and sometimes posts pictures on Instagram.

The kitchen table is a huge wooden oblong that takes up one half of the room. Despite its size, it’s constantly cluttered with Dad’s books and the boys’ games and toys. Right now, for instance, Dad’s laptop is squished at one end of the table, next to a stack of files, while a gazillion plastic robots are scattered across the rest. My stepbrothers, Ben and Billy, are sitting on either side of the table. Quiet, geeky Ben is building yet another plastic robot while little Billy – who loves winding up his older brother – is making ‘*vroom, vroom*’ noises as he drives a dented toy car across the table, scattering the bits Ben needs as he does so.

‘Stop it, Billy!’ Ben shouts. ‘You’re spoiling my robot.’

‘*My* robot!’ Billy shrieks, grinning from ear to ear.

I suppress a smile. Even when Billy's being super annoying, that cheeky grin of his makes it impossible to dislike him. I prod his arm. 'You know it isn't yours, Billy.'

'Is *too!*' insists Billy. He drives his car into a pile of purple plastic pieces, which promptly skitter across the table and cascade onto the floor.

'Hey!' Ben yells. 'You're ruining it!'

Dad looks up and frowns. 'Boys, please keep it down,' he says helplessly.

He's not the best at discipline. I think it's partly that my stepmum, Becky, is so good at it and partly because Dad's always been careful not to overstep. He's not the boys' biological dad, you see. Just mine. My mum – and my twin sister – were in a car crash and died just before my second birthday. Becky met Dad and came to live with us seven years ago, when Billy was one and Ben three.

I sit down next to Dad and take his phone. He frowns at his laptop while I tap at the phone screen and get Dad back into his work email. I glance over at the boys. Ben has picked up his robot pieces and is guarding them with his arm, while Billy looks on. Dad is engrossed in whatever he's reading on his laptop.

Nobody is watching me. I open the locator app on Dad's phone, which I know keeps tabs on my movements – or, rather, those of my mobile. It's the only thing Dad and

I argue about. I've given in on all the other things he's protective about: him picking me up from everywhere and speaking to parents if I'm staying over at a friend's house.

I think being able to track where I go takes the protective thing too far, especially now I'm almost fourteen. I know Becky agrees, but Dad refuses to give up the tracker. 'Maybe next year, Willow,' he says, whenever I ask. 'I only use it if you're out at a party.'

I carefully remove the track-phone function so Dad will no longer be able to follow my movements. If he's telling the truth about only using it when I'm at a party, he probably won't even notice for weeks.

As I put the phone back on the table, the front door slams shut.

'Mum!' Billy yells. 'Ben won't let me play with his robots!'

'Because you break them!' Ben's voice rises with hurt anger. 'You—!'

'That's enough, boys.' Becky sweeps into the kitchen, her red hair tied back in a messy bun. She dumps her shopping bag on the nearest free chair. 'Your turn to help me unload, Billy.'

If Dad had asked, Billy would undoubtedly have made a fuss, but he knows better than to fight his mum over household chores. Becky might be tiny – I overtook her

height-wise last year – but she’s fierce.

‘I’m not bringing up a pair of useless boys who expect a woman to run around after them,’ she often says.

Billy hoists a loaf of bread out of the shopping bag while Becky fills the kettle. Dad, after catching her hand and squeezing it as she passes, is poring over his laptop again. I get up and fetch the tin of teabags down from the shelf.

‘I’ll make it,’ I say, popping three bags in the big stainless-steel teapot.

Becky throws me a grateful smile. ‘Thanks, love,’ she says. ‘Hey, Willow, you still haven’t said what you want to do for your birthday? Takeaway? Meal out somewhere special? Pizza and a few friends?’

I shrug, feeling awkward. My fourteenth birthday is on Wednesday and, so far, I’ve resisted all attempts to organize any kind of celebration. I ruled out a party weeks ago. I definitely don’t want to be the centre of attention. The thought of opening presents with my friends focused on my reactions is beyond horrifying.

‘We can organize whatever you like,’ Becky says. ‘No noisy sleepover though, as it’s a school night.’

‘Would you like to see some of your mum’s family?’ Dad asks gently. ‘I’m sure they’d love to see you on your birthday.’

‘I guess.’ I don’t really know my aunts and uncles from

my birth mother's side of the family very well, so the idea of meeting up isn't that appealing. On the other hand, I do have two cousins my age, and the last time I saw them we got on great.

'It's a fantastic idea to invite them over, but it's a long way for them to come on a weeknight,' ever-practical Becky points out. 'Maybe we could organize a lunch party for next weekend?' she suggests.

'Okay,' I say.

'Of course, that still leaves your actual birthday on Wednesday,' Becky goes on.

Dad gazes at me, eyes full of sadness. 'That would have also been . . .' He looks away, clearly thinking about my twin sister.

I stare at him, feeling awkward. Dad and I used to talk about my mum and sister a lot, but recently I've become aware that whereas Dad still misses them, it's different for me. Sometimes I feel the *lack* of them, but you can't miss what you don't remember.

'Oh, Billy, no!' Becky sighs.

We all follow her gaze to where Billy is attempting to refill the sugar canister from the new bag Becky just brought in with the shopping. Tiny white sprinkles of sugar are spilling out across the countertop and onto the floor.

As Becky and Dad leap into action, the kettle comes to

the boil. I pour water into the teapot, then slip out into the back garden. The sun is out now, so I brush the rain off the plastic swing seat and plonk myself down.

It's not that I don't want a party. It's that parties mean photos and videos and social media and everyone at school judging you. If I had fuller lips and thicker hair and didn't look so shapeless, I wouldn't mind having a big get-together with everyone I know invited and taking a million photos. In fact, I'd love it.

I push myself back, then let the seat go. As I swing forward, I get that feeling of being watched again. I stop the swing and look over to the fence that borders the side street – our house is on the corner.

There! I catch a flash of blue between the fence posts. My breath catches in my throat. Was that just someone walking past?

Or is someone out there, lurking?

I tiptoe to the gate in the fence and ease it silently open. My heart is beating hard as I peer up and down the pavement. For a second I think the street is empty; then a boy in a blue hoodie steps out from behind a van parked a short way down the road. He walks towards me. I'm frozen to the spot.

The boy looks a little older than I am, with dark wavy hair, high cheekbones and piercing blue eyes. Even as the

fear rises inside me, I notice that he is strikingly handsome.

He stops walking. We stare at each other. My heart races.

‘Willow?’ he asks. His voice is low and very, very serious.

I nod, too shocked to speak.

‘I wasn’t sure whether to knock on the door,’ he says, a crooked smile flitting across his face. ‘But I wanted to get you on your own.’

These words should turn my fear into outright panic, but the boy doesn’t look like he wants to hurt me. If anything, he seems nervous. His hands pick at the strap of his backpack.

‘What do you want?’ I croak.

The boy hesitates. ‘I’ve got a message,’ he says. ‘A message from your twin sister.’

‘From . . . from . . . ?’ I shake my head and take a step away. Whoever this boy is, he’s clearly either crazy or deliberately trying to upset me.

‘Please,’ he urges. ‘Don’t go – I’m serious. I’m sure you know that a body was never found and . . . I know it must sound mad, but . . .’

‘My sister is dead.’ My voice is ice cold.

‘No, she’s alive,’ the boy says. ‘Asha’s alive.’

TWO WEEKS EARLIER