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Sample Chapter

Whispering Leaves

Chapter One

Something was wrong. It was too quiet. Outside, the leaves on the trees had ceased rustling. The busy chatter of voices in the bookstore beyond the door had died out. Even the clock on the wall had stopped ticking. Hadn't it been ten past four the last time he'd looked? And now the room was cooler too.

Oliver listened for sounds, any sounds, anything — and had the sudden sensation that someone was standing right behind him, whispering in his ear. He twisted around. But there was nobody there, nothing.

Rosa, across the table from him, looked up from her book. "What?" she said. "What?"

Someone was in the room, somewhere. Oliver opened his mouth to warn her, but then Rosa tensed up, jerking her head to the side like a dog, alerted, listening. Whatever was there, she sensed it now too. She clutched her armrest.

That's when Iris — who had been deep into her own thoughts at the shelf with the advance copies — whipped around, a book in her hand. Her eyes darted through the room. She, too, now seemed aware of a peculiar shift in the room's atmosphere. She might have had a brain the size and brilliance of the Large Hadron Collider, but when it came to reading her own body's messages Iris was clueless. Even so, she

must have realized that her heart was hammering away faster than usual, because she raised a hand to her chest as if to steady her heart, forgetting she had a book in her hand. It fell to the floor just as a clap of thunder boomed. Lightning lit up the room — KRAKK!

The children gasped.

Oliver heard quick steps. The door to the shop's main room swung open and the fresh, wet-earthly smell of the bonsai in the bookstore flooded the backroom. Cornelia Eichfeld, owner of the Whispering Leaves Bookstore, popped her head in. Behind her Oliver could see several customers and two-meter-high shelves stacked with books. Scattered among the books were miniature trees — the bonsai — displayed and lit as if in an art gallery, each tree its own little potted landscape.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to begin without me,” Cornelia said. “Bernd’s running late. He just called. Sorry.” As usual, the words were strung together in a breathless way, making everyone think she was in a rush. “Must get back to my customers. Ciao ciao.” She threw a smile at the children, but still spooked, they just stared. “Hey, are you kids okay?” Her eyes zoomed into Oliver.

Oliver nodded, but when he opened his mouth to say that they were all right, a wheeze came out instead.

“Oliver?” Cornelia asked.

“I’m fine,” he managed, clearing his throat and reaching into his backpack. He pulled out his mini inhaler. “I’m allergic to something in the room. That’s all.” He put the mouthpiece between his lips, breathed in and sprayed, inhaling the mist. He gave Cornelia a cheerful smile and waited for his chest to relax.

“You kids aren’t afraid of some thunder and lightning out there, are you? ‘Cause if — ”

“Certainly not! You just surprised us, that’s all,” said Iris, picking

up the book she'd dropped. "I was quietly contemplating the complexities of lightning and how its vibrations travel through the air and cause sound, also known as thunder, when you came in and — "

"Uh-huh," said Cornelia. Clearly, she wasn't interested.

But even more clearly, Oliver realized, Iris wasn't prepared to let Cornelia know that something weird had just happened in the room. Neither was Rosa, for she hadn't said anything either. Whatever was there, or had been there, it was theirs and no one else's.

"You can tell me all about it later," said Cornelia to Iris with a kind smile. She caught sight of the manga and vintage comics in front of Oliver, and Rosa's pile of teen romantasy paperbacks. "You have enough to keep you busy. It's just you. Emil called in sick, and everyone else is gone for vacation. Okay?"

The children nodded.

"And no fighting over books." Cornelia looked at Iris and then at Rosa. "Everyone has her own taste. How on earth will you ever know what you like, unless you try everything out? You're not born with taste. You acquire it." She turned to go ... but then took one more look around the room. Oliver thought he saw her face cloud up, but it was hard to tell because it had so much going on. She had smile lines around her mouth, crows' feet radiating outwards from her eyes like fireworks, and frown wrinkles stretching across her forehead like the folds of skin on a bulldog's brow. Oliver's father thought he was being funny when he said she looked just like her bonsai — prehistoric — but he only succeeded in sounding mean.

Cornelia gave the children one last "Ciao ciao" and returned to her customers, her long white braid trailing behind her.

Rosa, Oliver, and Iris were alone again.

Or were they?

They waited for a sign of whatever it was that had spooked them, but it was gone. They started breathing again.

“You do know, of course,” Iris began, “that thunder is actually — ”

“Yeah, yeah, we know all about it,” said Oliver who, of course, knew absolutely nothing at all about thunder. He just didn’t want Iris to go off on one of her tangents. She creeped him out. She talked like an adult. Contemplating the complexities of lightning? Hello? Why didn’t she talk her age? For a twelve-year-old she knew way too much. He was thirteen and she was already a grade ahead of him, which, he had to admit, had as much to do with him as her: he’d gotten left back once, the year he’d come down with asthma and had been out of school so much. But he’d still managed to get into Gymnasium — much to his father’s disbelief. “You and Gymnasium?” his father always said, looking up from his video game or his fifth beer or his betting ticket. “Ha! I won’t hold my breath.”

Oliver fished a green gel pen out of his pencil case.

“So pleased to hear you know all about thunder,” said Iris to Oliver. “One less thing for me to have to explain.” She plunked down on her chair. She was a plump child and a bit clumsy, and her arm accidentally bumped against the boy. She might as well have been a zombie — such was the look of sheer horror on Oliver’s face when limb met limb.

Iris pretended not to notice. She got looks like that all the time. She did not do well with children. And they did not do well with her. Maybe if she dressed differently things would go better for her, Oliver thought. Today she looked like a parrot: washed out red corduroy pants, a size too large; a purple and orange checked blouse that made him dizzy just looking at it; a green quilted vest. Aha — maybe that was why he was wheezing. It was likely padded with down feathers. He was allergic to them.

Oliver started to sketch a parrot: its head, its body, the —

“So,” Iris said, pouring herself some cola, “What was that all about?” She meant whatever it was that had spooked them. “How eldritch.” She took a sip of her drink and burped softly.

No one said anything — mostly because Oliver was trying to figure out what “eldritch” meant, and Rosa, who probably knew it meant “sinister,” was still too shaken to speak.

Oliver noticed that the knuckles on Rosa’s right hand were white from clutching her armrest. That’s how frightened she was. Her left hand, though, just lay on the tabletop, lifeless under that skin-colored rubbery glove she wore. He wished he could see what was under it. He guessed it was some kind of mechanical hand, like a robot’s, and the glove was supposed to protect it and make it look real. That’s what his mother told him, and she knew almost everything about everyone in the house. She was the janitor. In truth, his father was the janitor, but he never did anything in the building any more except make noise when he came home from the corner bar. Oliver’s mother, Heide-Marie Richter, did the caretaking — on top of running her own hairdresser’s around the corner, Heidi & Hair. Oliver helped her out a lot around the building and even had his own master key. Sometimes there had been another helper: Oliver’s brother Thilo. But now he was gone. No one knows if he — No! Oliver didn’t want to think about his brother: not now. It made him too angry. At Thilo. At his father. Even at his mother. And at himself too.

Oliver studied Rosa’s prosthetic glove. It was a good copy of a hand. It had veins, creases at the knuckles, and nails with half moons. But you could tell something wasn’t right because it was lifeless — until she used it, of course, which he hadn’t seen her do yet. He hardly ever saw Rosa around anymore, and this was only his third time at reading club.

Oliver wondered if the fingers could actually squiggle around electronically. Maybe her wrist even rotated. It would be so cool to sketch it. If only —

“What are you staring at?” Rosa said to Oliver: haughty, angry, annoyed, hurt, self-conscious — a whole gamut of emotions was squeezed

into that one statement. But mostly, at least to Oliver, she sounded haughty. She'd always been a little like that, but ever since the accident a year ago, it had gotten worse. A heroine at twelve! She saved her little sister Lily from getting run over by a car by pushing her away and getting hit herself. It was even in the evening news. Maybe she had a right to be haughty. But still.

“Hello?” said Rosa. “Are you deaf? What are you — ”

“Sorry,” Oliver said. He didn't want to make Rosa feel uncomfortable. He looked away and started sketching again in his notebook. A minute or two passed while Iris and then Rosa, too, followed his skillful hand move across the paper. He'd forgotten about the parrot and was drawing a lightning bolt with a silver gel pen. The girls watched as Oliver wrote the word K-R-A-A-K in bold comic book-lettering above the vertical zigzag.

KRAKK was the name Oliver gave his bonsai. Every member of the Whispering Leaves Reading Club — there were currently nine in total — had a bonsai in the store. It was their job to care for their tree, and in return they got free reading material. Iris had a dwarf apple tree and Rosa a miniature red maple, slender and straight. Oliver chose a weather-beaten plant with hundreds of tiny dark green leaves and a knotted trunk, bent all the way over to the right as if the wind had blown across it for a trillion and a half years. Its bark had been hollowed out, which made it look as if it had been struck by lightning — thus KRAKK! Oliver couldn't believe it, but Cornelia told him it was an olive tree: his namesake! She also explained that miniature olive trees were rugged little plants. She said she hadn't been surprised at all that he had chosen that one.

Oliver had known Cornelia ever since he could remember. She was kind to him, and always had something nice to say about his drawings. She got her hair cut at his mother's shop, Heidi & Hair, so she saw the drawings his mother Scotch-taped to her station mirror. For months,

Cornelia had been after him to join the reading club, but he wasn't a reader and always found some excuse not to go. "She's trying to save you from turning out like me," his father would say and then laugh. In the end, when Oliver didn't have any more excuses, he agreed to try it out. If Thilo had known Oliver was going to a reading club he'd laugh his head off.

Outside in the courtyard, the leaves on the trees — brown, red and yellow — were rustling up a storm. Oliver listened for the crisp, crinkly sound they made. His bedroom window faced the courtyard with its giant oaks. He liked falling asleep to the sound of their rustling.

The lights flickered. The children looked up, anxious, listening for strange sounds. A fly was buzzing, but that was all.

Iris jumped up and hopped over to the window facing the courtyard. It was a large courtyard, with a flowering garden, a cobblestoned walkway with pruned hedges, antique gaslights, two benches, a sandbox, and a seesaw, as well as entrances to the building's garden house and its north and south wings.

Oliver had grown up in that courtyard. When he had been seven, and wealthier families like Rosa's had started moving into the newly converted condominiums, Rosa had occasionally joined him on the seesaw. But that had been a long time ago. After that, he had used to watch her playing with her girlfriends from his bedroom window, but ever since the accident they had stopped coming.

Iris was studying the leaves, probably trying to discover some hidden pattern they were making as they fell. Or maybe the scratchy, tapping sounds they made when they hit the window was a secret code she was hoping to decipher. She turned back around to the children. "Well, whatever it was, it certainly wasn't a ghost! Ghosts don't exist."

Oliver didn't believe in ghosts either, but his eyes scanned the room for telltale signs of their existence anyway: he saw boxes with books, shelves with books, another table with books, the door to the bath-

room and the door and window to the courtyard. His eyes rested on a shelf where a state-of-the-art espresso machine reigned. That contraption had more buttons on it than an airplane cockpit.

“So if it wasn’t a ghost, what was it?” Iris asked.

“Why don’t you tell us already,” said Rosa. “That’s what you want to do anyway.”

“All right!” Iris said brightly, unperturbed by Rosa’s rudeness, “then I’ll tell you.”

Rosa snorted.

“The sudden drop in temperature is probably from the drafty door,” Iris announced, pointing to the courtyard.

“But I felt someone, something, in here,” Oliver whispered. “Right behind me. I heard it.”

Iris lowered her voice for effect. “That can be caused by a low-frequency sound wave. Or a magnetic field.” She threw him a smile, exhibiting two front teeth the size of Moses’ stone tablets. One tooth protruded like a fang. Oliver almost laughed at the sight, but that would have been mean. Instead, he asked, “How do you know all that?”

“Because I read,” answered the girl. She looked at the manga open in front of Oliver. And then at Rosa’s teen romantasy novels. “Real books, of course.”

Rosa snorted again.

“A magnetic field?” Oliver said, ignoring the affront.

“It can be generated by electronic equipment.”

“But there are only books back here,” said Rosa.

Iris pointed out the espresso machine. “That thing over there has enough electronic parts in it to keep the International Space Station orbiting for at least another decade.”

It was a joke, but no one laughed, because at that very moment the sky outside blackened — as if someone had come along and casually flicked on night mode. The children rose and went to the window

facing the street. Big, fat rain drops pelted down on the window. Maybe it was —

KRAKK! went an explosion of thunder. A bolt of lightning lit up the sky like day. The children jumped back as if they'd been electrocuted.

And then there was a knock — at the back door. A very loud and insistent knock. They spun around.

No one ever used the back door. But someone was clearly out in the courtyard, standing in the pouring rain, waiting to be let in like a stray dog.

The children crossed to the back window and peered out into the darkness. But they only saw their own reflection. Oliver sprang forward and switched off the light.

Now they could see a boy at the door. He was very tall and looked a bit older than they. He wore a dark T-shirt, jeans, a thin, burgundy-colored jacket, and a baseball cap. Surprisingly, he was perfectly dry.

The stranger gazed at the children through the window with nothing less than wonder. “Hi, there!” he called out in English, smiling broadly. “How are you?”

The children stared, flabbergasted, their mouths agape.

The boy knocked on the window. It rattled.

The wind was wailing and the rustling of the leaves on the trees was extraordinarily loud.

The children still stared.

The boy knocked again, louder this time. “Open the door!” he commanded. “Now!”

The children needed no translator to tell them that nothing less than extraordinary was about to happen.

Oliver let the boy in.