

Chapter One

The Visitor in the Shed

Max Watson woke up to the sun streaming through his window. He jumped out of bed and threw back the curtains. After a week-long rainy spell, he couldn't wait to get outside. He quickly got dressed before bursting out of his room.

"The sun's out," he yelled, thundering through the hall and down the stairs.

"What's all that noise?" his father asked when Max came barreling into the kitchen.

"The sun's out," Max repeated, gesturing toward the window. "I need to get out."

Grabbing his sweatshirt and shoes, Max was out the door.

Max was the oldest of four children and the only boy. Though lonely at times, he had an active imagination and a love for adventure to keep him entertained.

Back inside the house, the remaining three Watson children made their way slowly down the stairs.

"Max woke us up," Sophie whined to her father.

"He's outside already," Dad commented.

Sophie rolled her eyes dramatically. As the oldest girl, she felt a responsibility to keep her siblings safe. Her siblings, however, thought she was too protective and overly cautious.

Violet was the perfect example of a typical middle child. She was quiet, observant, and easily followed along with her more dominant siblings. Like Max, she had a highly active imagination and believed in all things magical.

Parker, the youngest, was absolutely fearless. She threw caution to the wind and ran into things headfirst without a second thought.

"Let's go see what Max is doing," Parker said, not wanting to miss out on anything.

"I'm still sleepy," Sophie whined.

"I'm hungry," Violet added.

"Suit yourself, I'm going out," Parker told them.

"You should all go out for a little bit," Mom suggested. "I'll make pancakes and call you in when they are ready."

"Fine," Sophie sighed with another eye roll.

"Get your scooters," Max called when the girls came out. "Let's race down the street."

Sophie walked to the shed and scrunched her nose at the mess. Dad had shoved things

haphazardly into the shed last week in a rush to get everything under cover before the rain came. Sophie spotted her scooter buried underneath some patio chairs. Violet peered around her sister, looking for her own scooter.

"Sophie, look back there," Violet said.

"What? Where?" Sophie asked, struggling to pull the tangled chairs off her scooter.

"In the corner, what is that?" Violet said.

"It looks like a stuffed toy," Sophie told her. "Dad probably tossed it in last week. Parker, did you leave one of your dolls outside?"

"What?" Parker asked, bringing her scooter to a stop in front of the shed.

"There's a doll in the back of the shed," Sophie pointed out.

"I'll get it," Parker said, climbing over a pile of patio furniture. She retrieved the toy and brought it out. "It's an elf doll."

Parker set the elf on the ground and took a step back.

"Whose elf is it?" Violet asked, leaning down to examine the doll. "Wait, what is it holding?"

The children all looked down at the elf. The elf was holding a cube in its hands.

"How is that cube staying there?" Sophie asked, leaning down to get a closer look.

Max shrugged as he reached down and took the cube from the elf's hands.

"This looks like one of those fidget cubes," he said, pushing and pressing the various buttons and switches.

Suddenly, there was a burst of light, followed by complete darkness. Seconds later, the sun was shining again.

"Wh...what just happened?" Violet asked, her eyes wide as she looked around.

"Where's the elf?" Parker asked, pointing to where the elf had just been.

The elf was gone.

"Max took it," Sophie said accusingly, not amused.

"No, I didn't," Max told her, shaking his head and holding out his empty hands.

"It's over there," Violet said, pointing toward the shed.

The kids all turned to see the elf standing inside the shed.

"How is it just standing there?" Max questioned.

As the children stood watching, the elf suddenly moved his arms, motioning toward them, before disappearing into the shed.

"I think he wants us to follow him," Violet said quietly.

"I'm not going in there," Sophie said, backing away a bit.

"Step aside," Parker said boldly, pushing past her siblings.

"Parker, get back here," Sophie said firmly. "You are not going in there."

"Too late," Violet muttered as Parker disappeared into the shed.

"Parker, get out here," Sophie called, peeking into the shed. "Parker? Guys, I don't see her."

"What?" Max said in annoyance. "We all watched her go in."

Max walked into the shed after her.

"Do you see her? Max?" Sophie called out. "Now, *he's* not answering."

Violet stepped into the shed and looked around.

"No way am I going in there," Sophie told her.

"It's just a shed, Sophie," Violet said, edging further inside.

"You guys, come back," Sophie demanded. "I'll get Mom and Dad."

No one responded. Sophie poked her head into the shed.

"Max? Violet? Parker?" she called.

With a huff of impatience, Sophie tiptoed carefully into the shed. The shed wasn't large; she could easily make out the back wall; however, her siblings were gone.

"This isn't funny, guys," she called out.

Sophie tripped and stumbled her way to the back of the shed. As she neared the wall, her ankle became twisted in a hose, and she fell forward. Expecting to hit the wall, Sophie was shocked when she landed with a gentle thud in something soft, cold, and wet.

"Snow?" Sophie questioned, looking down at the white powder around her.

Standing up, she brushed herself off and was startled by the thick jacket she now wore. The light sweatshirt she had put on this morning was now a large puffy jacket. Her jeans had been replaced by snow pants, and thick winter boots now covered her feet. She felt things bulging in her coat pockets. Reaching in one side, she pulled out a pair of thick gloves, and in the other pocket, she found a wool hat. Quickly, she put both on as the cold surrounded her.

"We are definitely not in the backyard anymore."