

K. B. Hoyle

The White Thread

The Gateway Chronicles Book 3

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C. S. Lewis quotation
Mere Christianity. New York: HarperOne, 1952

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“The proper motto is not ‘Be good, sweet maid, and let who can be clever,’ but ‘Be good, sweet maid, and don’t forget that this involves being as clever as you can.’ ” C. S. Lewis

Chapter 1

The Disappearance

Disappearance of Teenaged Boy in Rural Upper Michigan Confounds Law Enforcement; Investigation Continues . . .

Darcy Pennington sat up straight in bed, her eyes going wide as she took in the photograph accompanying the Internet article. It was an old picture, but it was undeniably him. A quick read down the page confirmed it.

Colin Mackaby, son of Lawrence and Rebekah Mackaby of Manhattan, New York, was vacationing in the Upper Peninsula with his family when his disappearance was reported on February 13th. The boy has had previous run-ins with the law and was initially thought to have run away from the camp at which his family was staying, but an area-wide search has turned up no leads. No residents in the nearby town of Logger’s Head recognized the boy. Police task forces have scoured the woods for miles around the camp with body-sniffing dogs, but no traces have been found. Police now fear a possible kidnapping and request that locals report any suspicious vehicles or persons. A hotline has been set up at the phone number listed below, and the Mackaby

family is offering a reward of \$50,000 for any information leading to the recovery of their son . . .

Darcy scanned the rest of the article, but it was nothing more than a description of Colin and what he had been wearing on the day he had disappeared. She leaned her head back against her headboard, her heart thumping within her chest. “Oh, Colin . . . what have you gotten yourself into?” she murmured.



“Hey! Furniture Girl!”

Darcy closed her eyes slowly, praying Brandon Cooper would lose her in the crowd. She shouldered her way past a hand-holding couple and ducked around the corner into the school’s math wing. Just a few more steps and she’d be at her locker. She could see Sam’s bright head bobbing as she stood along the wall, her blue eyes scanning for Darcy among the mass of students.

“Hey, Sam,” Darcy said, pulling up beside her and shooting a glance over her shoulder. She exhaled, relieved she couldn’t see Brandon Cooper anywhere. Then again, it was difficult to pick out any familiar face in the milling crowd. “How’d you do on the math final?” Darcy spun the dial on her locker combination and peeked surreptitiously over her shoulder again.

“Pretty good, I think. Mrs. Cranston said the grades would be up by Friday. Who’re you looking for?” Sam frowned, looking down the hallway. “Guess.” Darcy swung open her locker and bent over to paw through the

detritus of almost a year’s worth of textbooks, worksheets, notebooks, and old tests.

Sam sighed. “Oh. So he’s bothering you again, huh? If only you could tell him—”

“Tell him what, exactly?” Darcy pulled a couple strands of hair out of the corner of her mouth and peered up at her friend. “That I travel to a magical land every summer where I have magical powers and might be engaged— ish—to a prince?”

Sam's eyes filled with mirth. "Well, if you put it like that—"

"It sounds crazy, I know." Darcy extracted her biology notebook with a great deal of difficulty, sending random papers and chewed pencils skittering down the hallway between people's feet.

"Well, you have to admit," Sam said, retrieving a few papers for Darcy and shoving them into her hands, "it would probably get him to leave you alone."

"And get him to start another rumor about me. As if it hasn't been hard enough being 'Furniture Girl' all year. Even Mr. Richards calls me that sometimes!"

"Mr. Richards is one of the football coaches, isn't he? Maybe Brandon talks about you at practice."

Darcy groaned. "Oh, Sam, stop, please!"

"These yours?" A deep male voice asked in Darcy's ear and she jumped, but it was only Lewis, blinking owlishly at her and holding out a handful of papers. "I found them on the floor over there and thought I recognized your handwriting."

"Thanks, Lewis." Darcy shot him a half-smile and snatched the papers, shoving them into her locker before slamming it shut. She straightened and shouldered her bag. "Come on, guys, two periods of biology review and we're done for the day."

Sam gave a strangled groan as she pushed away from the lockers and attached herself to Darcy's side. They maneuvered their way back into the main flow and let themselves be swept along. Lewis loped easily in their wake; he had finally hit puberty, but he seemed all but oblivious to it. Although he had grown several inches and his voice had lowered several octaves, he still held the demeanor of the small, quiet boy who was used to being teased. It didn't help that he refused to shop for new clothes, so most of his shirts rode too high on his waist, and his pants, which had been long on him at the beginning of the school year, were now dangling two inches above the tops of his sneakers. Sam pestered him about it, but Darcy just shook her head in bemusement and kept her comments to herself.

They ducked into room 323 and made their way to their customary lab table by the windows in the back of the room. Lewis hated sitting in the back of any class, but Darcy and Sam despised biology so much that he had made this exception for the one class they all managed to have scheduled together.

“Sit!” Mr. Finch barked over the sound of the bell ringing. “I have one hour and thirty minutes to make sure you succeed on your exam tomorrow. Don’t waste my time and I won’t waste yours. Use the first thirty minutes to compare notes with your lab partners . . .”

As Mr. Finch continued to speak, Darcy was distracted by the cheerleaders at the next table, texting under the lab desk and giggling with their heads together. Darcy sniffed in disgust. She may not be perfect, but a school rule breaker she was not.

The closest cheerleader, a white-blond-haired girl named Sydney, looked up and speared Darcy with an icy glare. “What’s your problem, Furniture Girl?”

Darcy looked away and absorbed herself in pretending to study her biology notes while Sam and Lewis prattled on about the structure of DNA . . . or RNA . . . or something. Darcy rested her head on her hand and sighed as she listened to the cheerleaders’ derisive laughter. Finish the week. Just finish the week.

“Sam, did you get the e-mail I sent you last night?” Darcy whispered out of the corner of her mouth, glancing at Mr. Finch to make sure he was still busy on the far side of the classroom.

Sam stopped talking mid-sentence about RNA and gasped, turning huge eyes on Darcy. “Oh my gosh, yes! I can’t believe that!”

“If it hadn’t been so late, I would’ve called you, but I technically wasn’t even supposed to be on the Internet at the time.” Darcy looked around Sam to Lewis. “I copied you on the e-mail, Lewis, did you get it?”

“No,” he said, paging through his notes. “I was studying for biology.”

“Well, read it when you get home . . . it’s about Colin. I finally found him.”

Darcy had been looking for information on Colin Mackaby, ever since returning from Alitheia the previous summer, but she was alone in her curiosity about Colin and what role he played in their other-worldly adventures. Sam and Lewis had long ago written Colin off as a nut job and an overall bad guy. Darcy, though, couldn't forget the haunting vision of Colin crying over his broken ribs on the dock at Cedar Cove, nor how his left palm had not borne the scar she'd thought they'd shared. She knew he had to have some answers for her, but he had been like a ghost all year. She hadn't been able to find him on any social networking sites, hadn't found an e-mail address, and hadn't even found anything about his parents until the article she'd uncovered the night before.

She wondered why it had taken so long for the article to turn up, seeing as Colin disappeared in February and it was now June, but it had looked like a scanned page from a small local newspaper. Perhaps they hadn't posted it to their website until recently. She'd looked for further information, but all she'd found was a quick update stating Colin Mackaby was still missing.

"Well?" Lewis stared at her, surrendering studying biology to talk about Colin. "What did you find?"

Darcy shook her head, glancing meaningfully to Mr. Finch who was inching closer to their workspace. "Later," she said.

"Doesn't it kind of remind you what happened to Eleanor Stevenson?" Sam asked, swinging her bag at her side as the three of them walked down Milwaukee Avenue, heading to Darcy's family's store. Every other day Darcy was expected to go straight to the store after school to complete various menial tasks—without pay, of course. Sam and Lewis usually accompanied her, even though it lengthened their usual route home, and Darcy always appreciated the company.

"That's what I thought at first, but now I'm not so sure."

"Why not? She disappeared at Cedar Cove, and now Colin has, as well."

"But they found her body, Sam," Darcy said. "Colin's just . . . gone." "Maybe he wandered off and froze to death somewhere," Lewis said, sounding grumpy. "It would serve him right."

"Lewis!" Darcy reprimanded him. "That's horrible! If you had seen . . ."

She trailed off and shook her head. “His dad is awful! I’m more concerned about Colin having been murdered by his dad than having wandered off. But I guess I don’t really think that happened, either.”

“So what do you think happened?” Lewis asked.

“Honestly . . . I think he’s in Alitheia.”

“But I thought you said—” Sam started.

“But he can’t have gone through the gateway!” Lewis interrupted.

“I know, I know!” Darcy responded to both of them. “I don’t think he’s

died, like Eleanor has died in our world, but I do think Tselloch found a way to draw him through.”

Lewis shook his head. “I don’t know, Darcy. Rubidius said it was highly unlikely for people to get through without a gateway.”

“Well, do you have any better ideas?” Darcy asked.

Lewis sniffed and pushed his glasses up on his nose.

They drew up alongside Darcy’s dad’s store, and Darcy glared up at the

sign with gritted teeth. It looked just as awful today as it had the day Darcy had tearfully begged her father not to put it up. For their family Christmas picture earlier that year, Darcy’s dad had insisted they pose on a couch in the store. They all had dressed up in their matching Christmas sweaters, and a professional photographer had arranged them artfully on the couch as they smiled cheesy pasted on smiles. Darcy had thought that had been that the end of it.

Later, she’d heard her dad ordering a four-by-six print and thought that was rather small. And then the print arrived—not four by six inches, but four by six feet—not for hanging in the house, but for hanging outside the store.

“Pennington Furniture Surplus” it read, the hideous picture beside it with the new caption “A Family Store.”

The sign had gone up the week before Christmas break and, thanks to Brandon Cooper and his network of friends, by the time school resumed after Christmas, everybody was calling Darcy “Furniture Girl” and approaching her in the hallway to say “nice sweater,” or “are you for sale along with the

couch?” She’d been mortified, but as much as she’d pleaded with her dad to take the sign down, he’d merely insisted that the teasing would pass.

Darcy stared up at it, pursing her lips, and then yanked open the door, a small bell chiming above her head.

“We’ll meet you inside,” Sam said, staring down at her phone. “My mom wants to know what time I’ll be home, and she’s got Lewis’s mom on the house phone wondering the same thing.” Sam poked Lewis in the ribs. “Your mom says to turn your phone on.”

“Sure, whatever.” Darcy waved a dismissive hand and let the door close behind her. Cold air and the smell of leather and upholstery blasted her in the face. Her dad looked up from the back corner where he was wooing a potential customer. He waved her forward and returned to his sales pitch. Darcy sighed and meandered to the back of the store, weaving her way between the scattered floor displays, and came to a halt with her arms crossed several feet from her dad.

“ . . . think I’m going to keep looking,” the elderly lady was saying.

“Well, if you change your mind, here’s my card. You can call me any time of the day or night, and remember we offer the warranty package with the free stain protection treatment thrown in to boot!” Her dad held out his card and shook the lady’s hand.

The bell over the door chimed again, and Darcy turned to see Sam and Lewis entering the store. The old lady narrowed her eyes and looked from Darcy to the other two, as though the mere presence of teenagers boded mischief for her day.

Darcy’s dad turned to her, his eyes weary. Darcy knew business had been tough lately, but she was surprised at how old he suddenly looked and some of her irritation melted away.

“Dad—”

“Put your bag in my office, Darcy, and grab a broom.” He rubbed his hands over his face and looked around at the floor displays as if deciding where to have Darcy begin sweeping.

Darcy ignored her dad's directive. "Everything okay, Dad?"

"Hmmm? Oh, everything's fine. Just tired. But I just finished some interviews and hired on a boy to help in the back over the summer. I think he's about your age. Brandon Cooper, you know him?"

Darcy's jaw dropped as her arms slipped down to her sides. "Dad! He's the one who started all those rumors about me this year! You hired him?"

Allan Pennington frowned. "Are you sure, Darcy? He doesn't seem the type."

"Of course I'm sure." Darcy stomped her foot and threw her bag onto the nearest chair in frustration.

"Well, if that's true, then working together will give you a chance to mend your differences." He walked away from her, his attention already on the next task at hand.

There were a whole lot of things Darcy wanted to say to her father's retreating back, but her concern for him warred with her frustration. She contented herself with merely throwing a silent fit as another customer entered the store. Chad, her dad's regular salesman, moved forward from the counter to greet the customer and Sam threw Darcy a sympathetic grimace from the front of the store. Lewis had settled into an armchair with his notebook on his knee.

"Broom, Darcy," her dad called over to her as he held his office door open. "I need the store swept and dusted before closing. If Sam and Lewis want to stay, I have plenty of jobs for them to do around here as well." He disappeared into his office.

Darcy huffed and shouldered her bag in resignation. She detoured to the front of the store on her way to the office. "You'd better get out of here," she muttered to Sam and Lewis, "or my dad's going to put you to work."

"Darcy." Sam's gentle hand on her arm stopped her as she turned away. "Only one month until Cedar Cove, and then . . . well, you know." The corner of her mouth lifted.

"If I survive until then," Darcy said.