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NATALIE LLOYD



THE
WITCHING
WIND

"A triumphant tale about belonging, friendship, family,
and believing in your own beauty."—Dan Gemeinhart,
New York Times bestselling author of *The Midnight Children*



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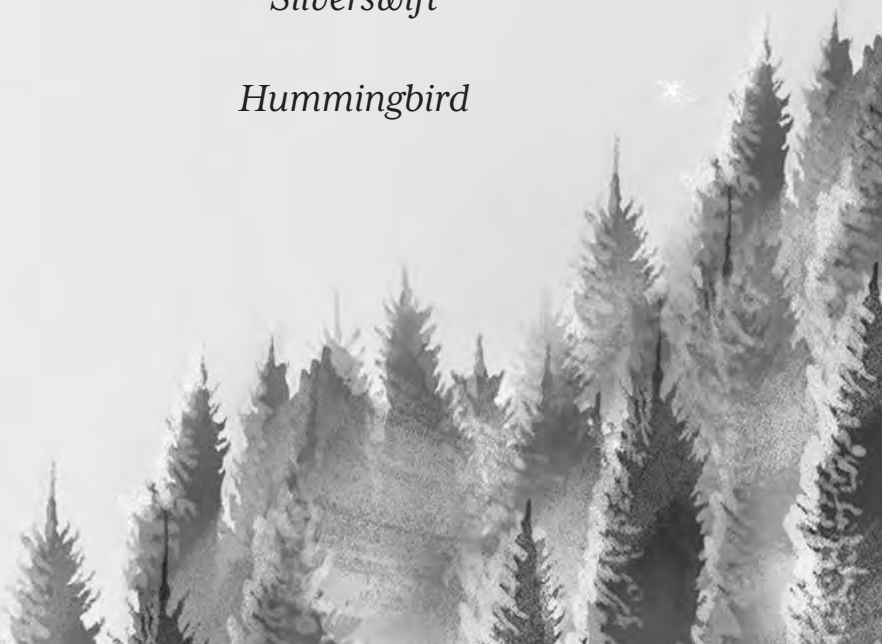
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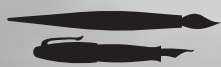






THE WITCHING WIND

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For Nick Seifert,
because he's a magical mix of funny,
smart, curious, and kind.
And because I love him.
And I love being his aunt.



CHAPTER 1
Grayson

Maybe Grayson Patch is a ghost.

Maybe you're one, too.

We could all be ghosts and just not realize it. What if this is the great forever-after and we're already stuck inside it?

Take a breath, Grayson Patch.

That's what Deloris—Grayson's previous foster mom—always told her.

She said Grayson thought about too much weird stuff. And asked too many weird questions.

But “weird” is Grayson's natural state of being and she's fine with that, thanks. Besides, Grayson's got solid proof for the ghost-girl hypothesis! Like:

1. Why doesn't anybody talk to her at school? She's attended four different schools now. But kids barely speak

to her, ever. Sometimes a teacher calls out her name—GRAYSON! And she flinches because it's so unexpected. At least she knows she's real on those days. And yet . . .

2. Why doesn't anybody Grayson's own age remember her name? Deloris said Grayson had a forgettable face and that was a good thing. But Grayson can't see how that's true unless your big life goal is becoming a criminal mastermind.

(This is not her dream, FYI. At least not yet.)

Then again, Grayson really doesn't care if everybody forgets she exists. Not as long as her big sister, Beanie, remembers. Beanie calls her Gray—like her name means something soft and gentle. Like blankets or cloud shadows.

Sometimes you can hear love in a person's voice. Whenever Grayson's with Beanie, she hears love. She knows she's real. And yet . . .

3. Why hasn't Ms. Betsy, the case worker currently driving this van, said a word to her on this trip? Seriously, not one single word since she picked up Grayson to take her to her new foster family. Ms. Betsy hasn't even glanced in Grayson's direction, even though Grayson is sitting right beside her in the front seat. So maybe this is when the truth comes out? Maybe Grayson's story has a twist like the R. L. Stine book crammed in her backpack?

Maybe Grayson's a ghost.

Maybe Beanie's one, too! And now they get to meet up at secret ghost headquarters and live in a house together—

just the two of them—just like they’ve always wanted!
And—

“Only a few more miles,” Ms. Betsy says, speaking for the first time. Since Grayson’s the only other person in the car, this update is surely intended for her.

Guess I’m real today, Grayson thinks.

But what she says is “Cool.”

And she means it. Wherever *there* is, she’s glad it’s close. Because:

1. Ms. Betsy’s car smells like somebody farted in a flower shop. Grayson knows that smell because the Dawsons had two little boys—twins. Toddlers are champion tooters. Yes, it’s gross, but it’s true.

2. One more mile of road means one mile farther from Beanie. Which will only make it harder to get back to her.

And Grayson will get back to her sister. They’ve been staying in different foster homes. But Beanie’s about to turn eighteen and she’s always promised Grayson that as soon as Beanie’s a legal adult, she’ll become Grayson’s guardian. The two of them will drive north and rent a little apartment in New York City. It’ll look as magical as it does in the movies, with a big window so they can see all the city lights. Maybe they’ll even adopt a cat!

So, this present situation is truly no big deal. Grayson can deal with another new foster family for forty-eight hours. Because Beanie Patch’s eighteenth birthday is on Saturday. That’s probably why she hasn’t texted Grayson

today. She's probably out buying snacks for their big road trip.

An announcer cuts through the twangy country song playing on the radio with a weather warning:

“Clip in, friends! There's a Witching Wind advisory for all of Silas County. We're looking at a Category Four today. Not the wildest we've seen. But it'll rock ya if you're not ready!”

Grayson sits taller in her seat. Most of the small towns she's lived in were basically the same. But this two-stoplight Tennessee town has a unique quirk. For a couple of weeks in August, a strange phenomenon called the Witching Wind rolls through the hills of Silas County. The Witching Wind is like a mini tornado but more dangerous. There are all kinds of stories about the wind, too: how it got here, what it does, what it can do. It's entirely weird—which is why Grayson kinda digs it.

Apparently, Ms. Betsy does not.

She gasps, swerves off the highway, and parks the minivan. As Ms. Betsy frantically checks the weather app on her phone, Grayson gazes out the window. A cloud of dust billows around the glass. She imagines what it'd be like to open the door, sprout wings, and fly through the dust and into the sky. Back to Beanie.

But Ms. Betsy is a mind reader apparently. She locks the doors. Narrows her eyes. “Don't even think about it, Patch. Sit tight.”

Grayson glances over her shoulder—specifically, at the sparkly blue walker folded up in the back seat.

“Do you honestly think I’m going to try to run?”

Ms. Betsy’s still scanning her phone, her expression tense. “I heard one of you Patch girls tried to run off during a home exchange.”

“That was Beanie. She wasn’t running away, though. She forgot her library book at the old house. She intended to come right back.”

“Watch the attitude, please.” For the record, Grayson wasn’t talking with an attitude. She was just talking like herself! Her voice isn’t all rainbows and sunshine and she can’t help it; that’s just her. Dogs are the only creatures she knows how to talk sweet to. Everybody else just gets the real Grayson Patch.

“Sorry, ma’am.” Grayson tries to make her voice gentler again. Nicer. But she’s not sure she even knows how to do that. Beanie is the one who always knows the right things to say. Ms. Betsy mumble-reads the weather report again. “Looks like we can make it to the Cottons’ before we need to hunker down.” She grips the steering wheel so tight her knuckles turn white. “D-don’t be afraid, okay?”

Grayson nods. She feels zero fear when it comes to the Witching Wind. She doesn’t feel much of anything these days.

Ghost girls never do.

With a determined grunt, Ms. Betsy shifts the van

back into drive. Then in a low, rumbly, movie-villain voice she says, “Buckle up, Patch.”

Grayson can't help but giggle, just a little. But the laugh's cut short when Ms. Betsy slams down on the gas pedal. The van tires sling mud across the windows and Grayson's pinned to the front seat for a few seconds like an astronaut leaving Earth. Once they're on the road, Ms. Betsy yanks at her seat belt—two hard tugs—to make sure it's tight. Beads of sweat drip down the side of her face. She keeps glancing in the rearview as if she's trying to outrun something big.

“You're acting like some monster's chasing us,” Grayson says.

Ms. Betsy snorts. “Oh, honey. It's much worse than that.”

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