

LEVELED Book • T

THE RETURN TO THE HOLLOW

- PART I -



Written by Rus Buyok
Illustrated by Thomas Boatwright

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We're in the cafeteria, hanging orange and black streamers on the tables. The librarian at the public library knows Principal Taylor and told him about our unauthorized trip into the attic. Helping decorate for tomorrow's Halloween party is our punishment.

"The journal we found in my dad's office belonged to my mom," Sarah whispers.

"What makes you say that?" I ask, carefully twisting the paper and taping it to the table.

"I examined it carefully, and the handwriting looks similar to a letter she wrote me a long time ago . . . and her name is written inside the cover."

"Great detective work, Sherlock," I laugh. "Well, I've been reading the book from the library, and it's missing pages—the pages that might give us some useful information, of course."

"Ladies, this isn't social hour," Principal Taylor says. "We have plenty of streamers. Why don't you help Mrs. Shoemaker with the skeletons."



Later that night, Sarah works on her costume in my room. I sit on the bed, the tome we sneaked out of the library and Sarah's mom's journal open in front of me.

"The loose pages in your mom's notebook are the missing pages from the book," I say.



"That's why I brought it over," Sarah mumbles around the pins in her mouth. She's trying to sew strips of shimmering fabric to her fairy wings. "I should have had Aunt Terra do this. She's a much better **seamstress** than I'll ever be."

"Your mom talks about finding the same book we found at the library. She was doing some sort of research on strange occurrences around town—with her sister. I knew your Aunt Terra was hiding something!"

"Does it say why she was researching?" Sarah asks.

"Not that I can tell. It seems to be a collection of research notes. It says, 'Keep moving forward. Make sure everything is in its place.' over and over."

"I read that," Sarah says. "It was strange reading her writing. I can't really remember her voice, so I just kept wondering what it would sound like if she were saying those things."

I don't know what to say, so I keep flipping through the pages. "She does note an old lantern that hung over Porter's Mill's front door and how John Porter's wife was a seamstress."

I unfold the large, yellowing pages that had been stuffed in the journal. "The pages she tore out of the book tell about some sort of **geologic** event that changed the path of the river. Your mom has a note in her journal that says, 'No recorded geologic **disturbances** in area.'"

I read from the yellowing pages: “The mill had to close down, and while they were making plans to **relocate** it, John Porter’s wife passed away.”

Sarah sets her costume aside and joins me on the bed. “That’s terrible,” she says.

“John Porter and their adopted children were **devastated**. Plans to relocate the mill were canceled, and not long after, they stopped appearing in town. Others went into the forest to seek them but couldn’t find the mill, supposedly becoming lost in the maze of forest paths.”

“This is sounding more and more like some spooky story,” Sarah whimpers.



"Totally," I say as I unfold another page torn from the book. "Look at this, though."

"It's a map!" Sarah exclaims.



"An old map of the Hollow and the town of Porter's Mill. The river doesn't run in its usual path around the woods—it runs right through the middle. Your mom circled this mark."

I point to a spot close to the top of the map. "It's faded, but it looks like it says 'Porter's Mill.'"

I suddenly get the chills, but then I stop myself. Things are lining up a bit too well for me to accept **coincidence** as an excuse.



I think about Halloween night last year—meeting that strange boy in the Hollow and being chased by those laughing voices. The whole thing seemed like a big **hoax**, and it was completely possible that the kid and his friends were just playing **elaborate** jokes all along.

Sarah or I had seen a young boy at the Cave of the Lost and by the lake when we were camping. They could have easily been the ones who pulled all the pranks and framed Rob Turtle, and they could have been in the library that day we found the tome.

We took the bait hook, line, and sinker. I look at Sarah's face, which is filled with fright and more than a little sadness. From the inside, the joke seems incredibly **cruel**. From the outside, our reactions probably seemed **hilarious**.

"All this could just be a **horrific** joke by some nasty kids," I say, trying to sound comforting.

Sarah shakes her head. "You might be right, but even if it is a joke, it led me to Mom's journal. It's a piece of her I never knew about. I want—no, I need to know more. I need to know why she went into the Hollow, and I have to try to find out why she never came out."

I've never seen Sarah with this kind of **resolve**. She seems stronger, and I suddenly feel proud of her. "Let's go talk to Aunt Terra," she says.





“These are not good questions for children,” Aunt Terra says when Sarah shows her the journal. “Give that back and let’s work on your costume.”

“No, Aunt Terra. I’m sorry, but I need to know what happened with Mom.” Sarah’s voice is calm and direct. “The journal is just random notes, and we don’t know how they all go together. Please, what happened?”

A shadow of emotion passes over Aunt Terra’s face. I don’t think she ever really expected Sarah to ask these questions. She sighs and says, “Sit with me, children.”

"Your mother," she says to Sarah, "was the best of friends with Qynn's Uncle Jasper. He was quite the young explorer, and he stayed with us in our village in Nepal. He helped our family come to the United States years ago. Jasper even introduced your mother and father."

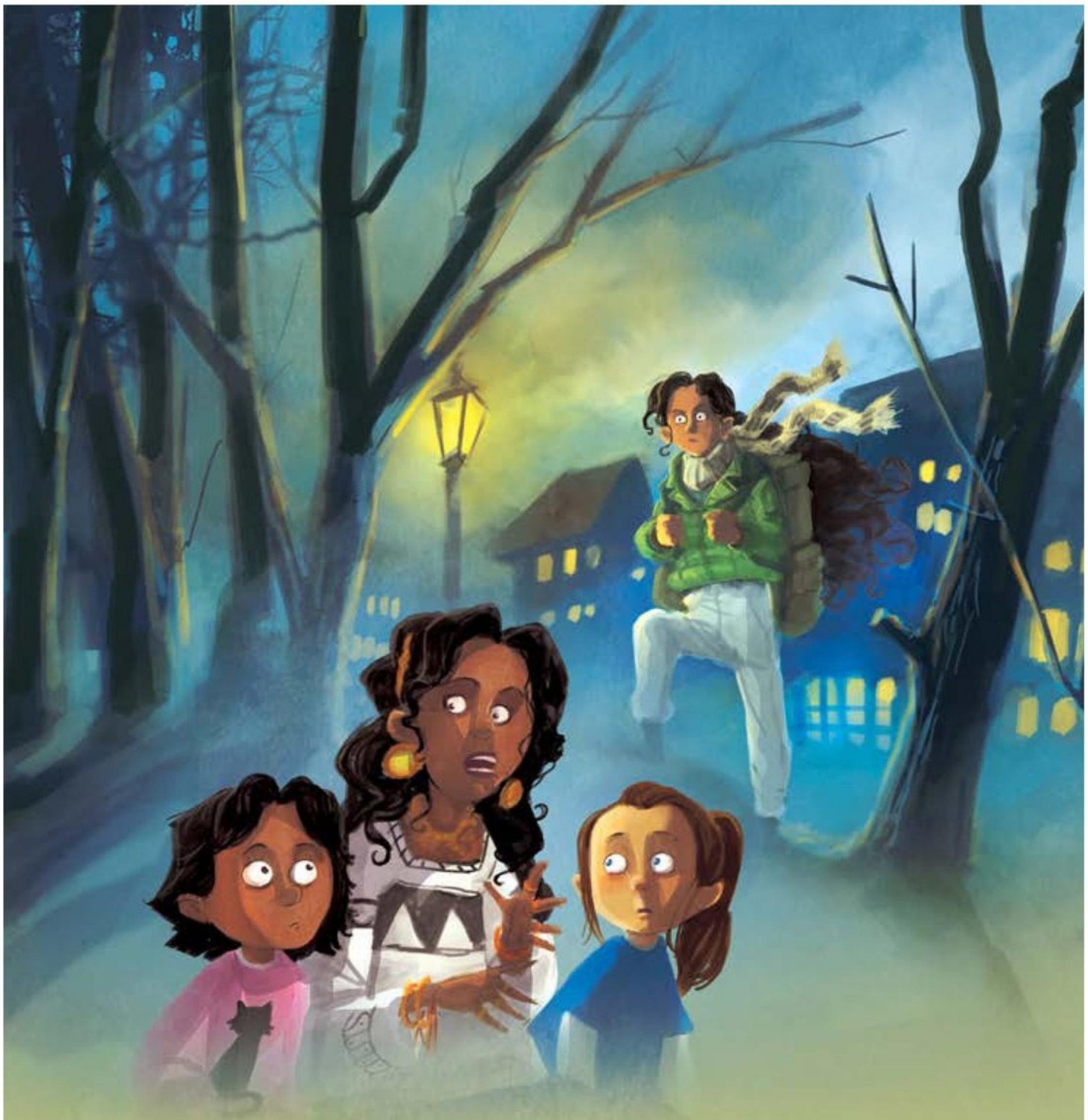
"I never knew any of that," Sarah said.



“When Jasper disappeared, Anna was devastated,” Aunt Terra continued. “She was determined to find him. He was also my friend, so I helped however I could.”



“One day Anna asked me to watch you, Sarah, and didn’t come back for a long time—too long. Your father and I were very worried. She came back with the key, scissors, and lantern. She said they had belonged to John Porter and his wife. Anna showed me a map, an old map, and said she could find Porter’s Mill—and she said this was where Jasper had disappeared.”



"Why? What was at Porter's Mill?" I ask.

"I don't know—adventure, I suppose," Aunt Terra whispers. "All I know is Anna took those things with her and disappeared herself. Now you have found them, and I think someone is playing a mean joke. That's why I took them away—I don't want you to be hurt."

Aunt Terra stands up, wipes her eyes, and smiles at us. “That’s all I know—no more secrets. I’ll go make you girls holiday cookies in pumpkin shapes. You’d like that, no?” She leaves without waiting for our response.

We listen to Aunt Terra moving around in the kitchen for a few minutes. Suddenly Sarah looks straight at me and says, “Well, that settles it.”

“Settles what?”

“We have to go into the Hollow tomorrow night and find Porter’s Mill.”



To be continued ...

Glossary

coincidence (<i>n.</i>)	a situation in which similar or related things happen at the same time by accident (p. 8)
cruel (<i>adj.</i>)	mean or unkind; causing suffering or pain (p. 10)
devastated (<i>adj.</i>)	caused great emotional pain (p. 7)
disturbances (<i>n.</i>)	acts or events that bother, interrupt, or stop something (p. 6)
elaborate (<i>adj.</i>)	having many parts and details; complicated (p. 9)
geologic (<i>adj.</i>)	of or having to do with land, rocks, soil layers, or minerals (p. 6)
hilarious (<i>adj.</i>)	extremely funny (p. 10)
hoax (<i>n.</i>)	something meant to mislead or trick (p. 9)
horrific (<i>adj.</i>)	causing intense fear; shocking (p. 10)
relocate (<i>v.</i>)	to move from one place to another (p. 7)
resolve (<i>n.</i>)	the commitment or drive to work toward a difficult goal; determination (p. 10)
seamstress (<i>n.</i>)	a woman who sews as a profession (p. 5)

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