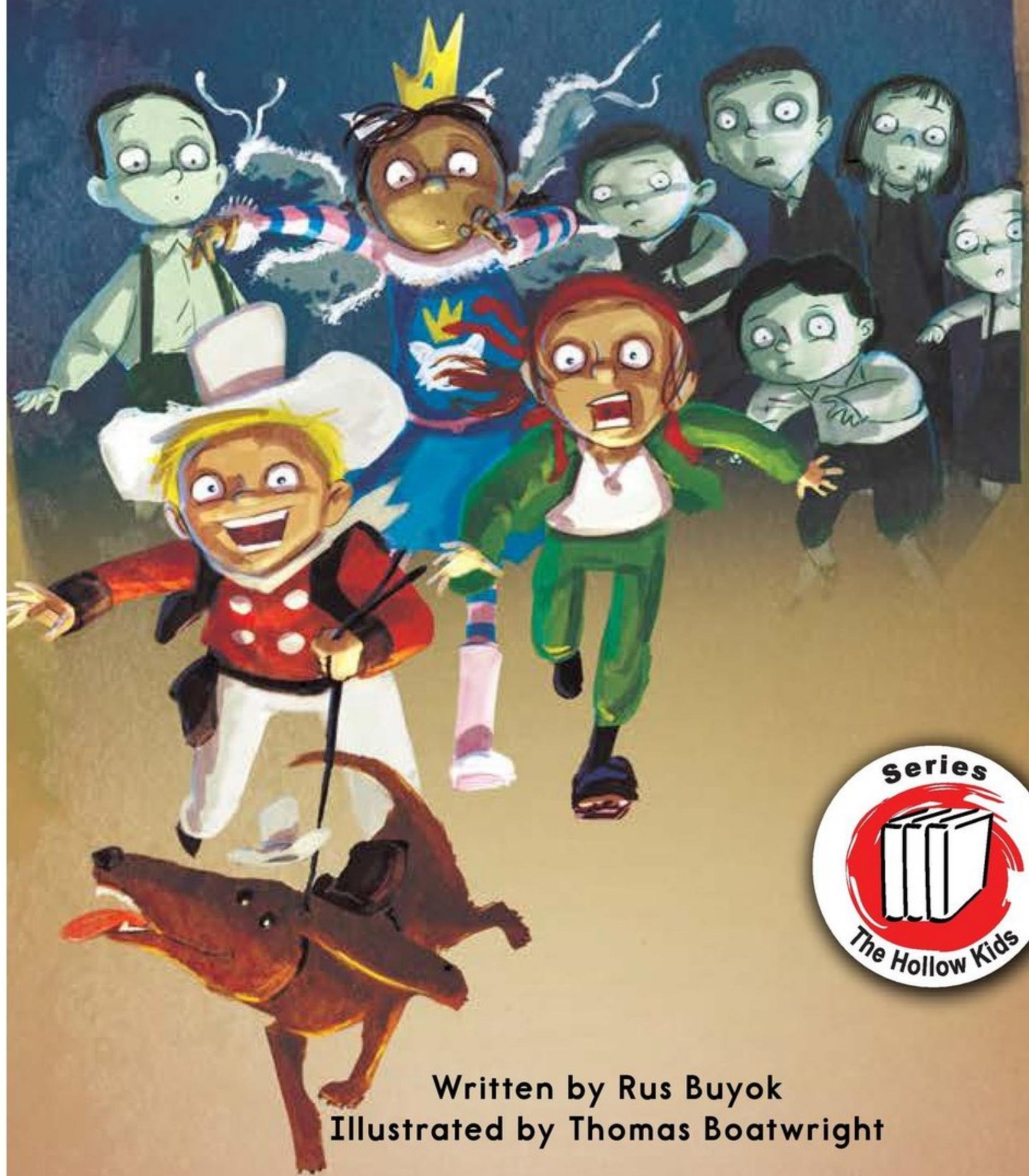


LEVELED BOOK • T

THE RETURN TO THE HOLLOW

- PART III -



Written by Rus Buyok
Illustrated by Thomas Boatwright

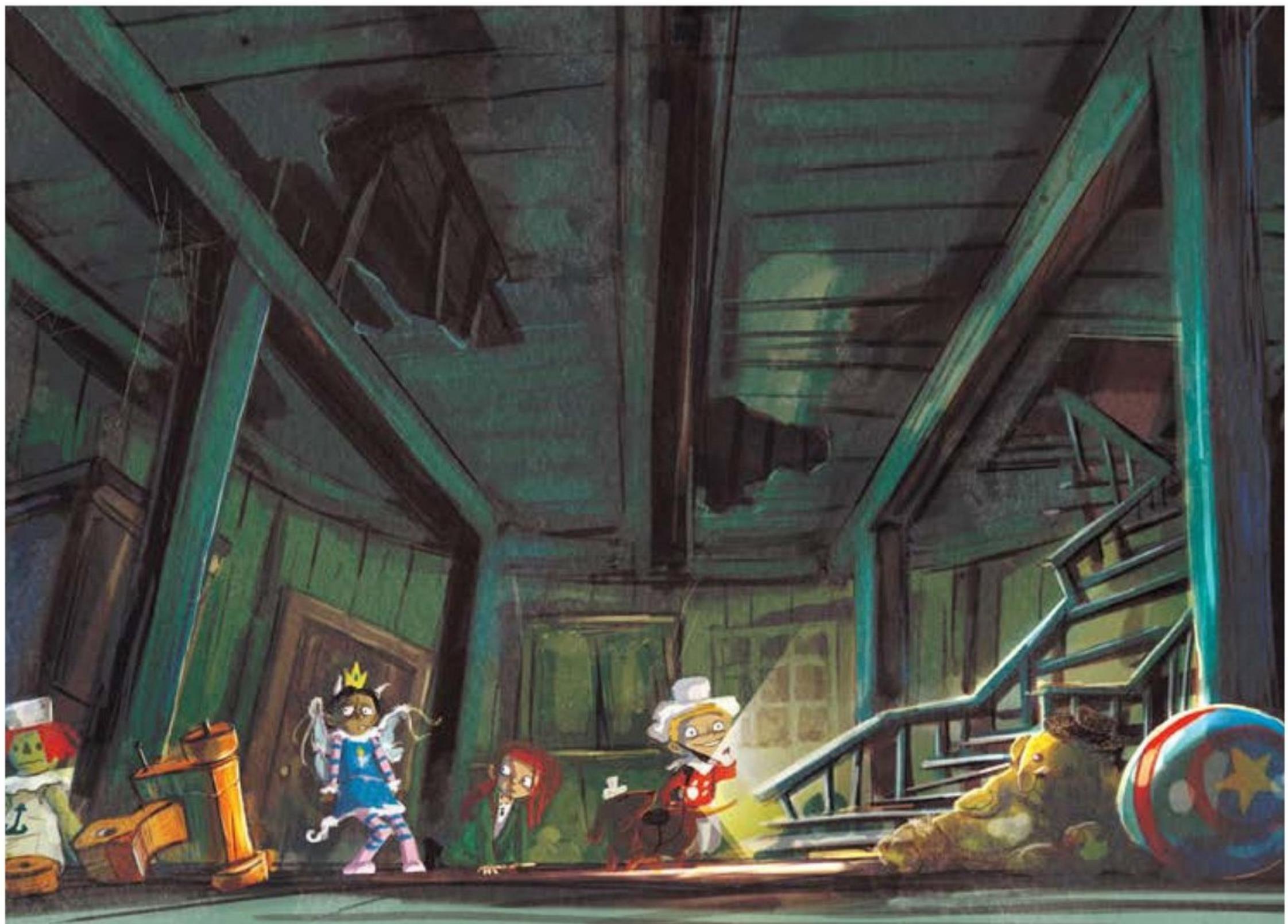
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www.readinga-z.com



I pick myself up off the floor after jumping through the hidden door. On the other side, it's quiet—almost completely silent. The laughter of the children who chased us through the Hollow has disappeared. Sarah presses herself against the door. Jake and Odie are already using Jake's flashlight to **explore**.

We're in a large room. It's curved, with a staircase wrapping around the wall. It doesn't really look as if it has been **abandoned** for long—more like someone messy has been living here.

"Where are we?" I ask.

"Porter's Mill," Sarah whispers. "I can't believe we're actually here."

We start to look around and find many toys, some broken, some well cared for. Plates and silverware, and some old bags and kitchen supplies litter the corners.

"Be careful, Jake," I say as he picks up a broken toy.

"I wonder what's upstairs," Sarah says as she heads up.



Sarah gasps, and I rush upstairs. The space is just as large as below, but it looks as if it used to be divided into rooms. The walls have large holes in them now, and when I shine my light in I can see small beds.



Sarah kneels in one of these rooms, brushing at something in her hands with her flashlight clenched between her head and neck.



She holds it up to the light, and I can see it's a **pendant** of some sort. Sarah opens it. Inside are two aged photos. On the left is a younger version of Sarah's dad, smiling. On the right is a baby with thick black, curly hair.

"That's me," Sarah says with a sob. "That's me. This was my mother's."

I reach out to comfort her, and she suddenly jumps up and starts **frantically** running around the rooms.

"There has to be more," she says. "She was here, so she must have left something else for me."

I try to help, but neither of us find anything. I've never seen Sarah look so disappointed.

“I’m sorry” is all I can say when we’ve searched every nook and cranny. Sarah just shakes her head and gives me a smile.

“At least I found something. Thanks for your help,” she says.

Jake laughs loudly downstairs, but then we hear more laughter—children’s laughter.

Sarah and I bolt down the stairs.

Jake and Odie chase the boy around the middle of the room, surrounded by laughing children we’ve never seen before. The boys all wear similar costumes, while the girls wear dresses that look just as old.



As soon as they see us, they fall silent, looking upward with **sorrowful** expressions.

"They came out of hiding!" Jake exclaims.

"Who are you?" Sarah asks. The boy from the Hollow **nudges** a young girl forward.



"We're very sorry," she says. "We thought trying to scare you would be fun, but it was cruel." A **multitude** of apologies follow hers.

"They didn't want you to come here," the boy says.

"We liked playing outside, Thomas," the girl whines.

“Our play was hurting others,” the boy named Thomas replies and turns back to us. “We needed to play here, where we wouldn’t cause problems, but we needed your help getting in.”

“This isn’t really a good place for children to be playing alone,” I say.

“We’re not alone,” the boy says.

Sarah steps forward, holding out the locket she found. “This was my mother’s. Was she here? Where did she go?”



"This happened years ago. They would have been too young to know anything," I say.

"We're older than we look," Thomas says. "Maybe those will help." He points to a small cupboard hanging on the wall. I walk over and pull out a short stack of papers with small, neat handwriting on them. A few pages have drawings—one looks as though it could be the mill, another is of an **ornate** door.

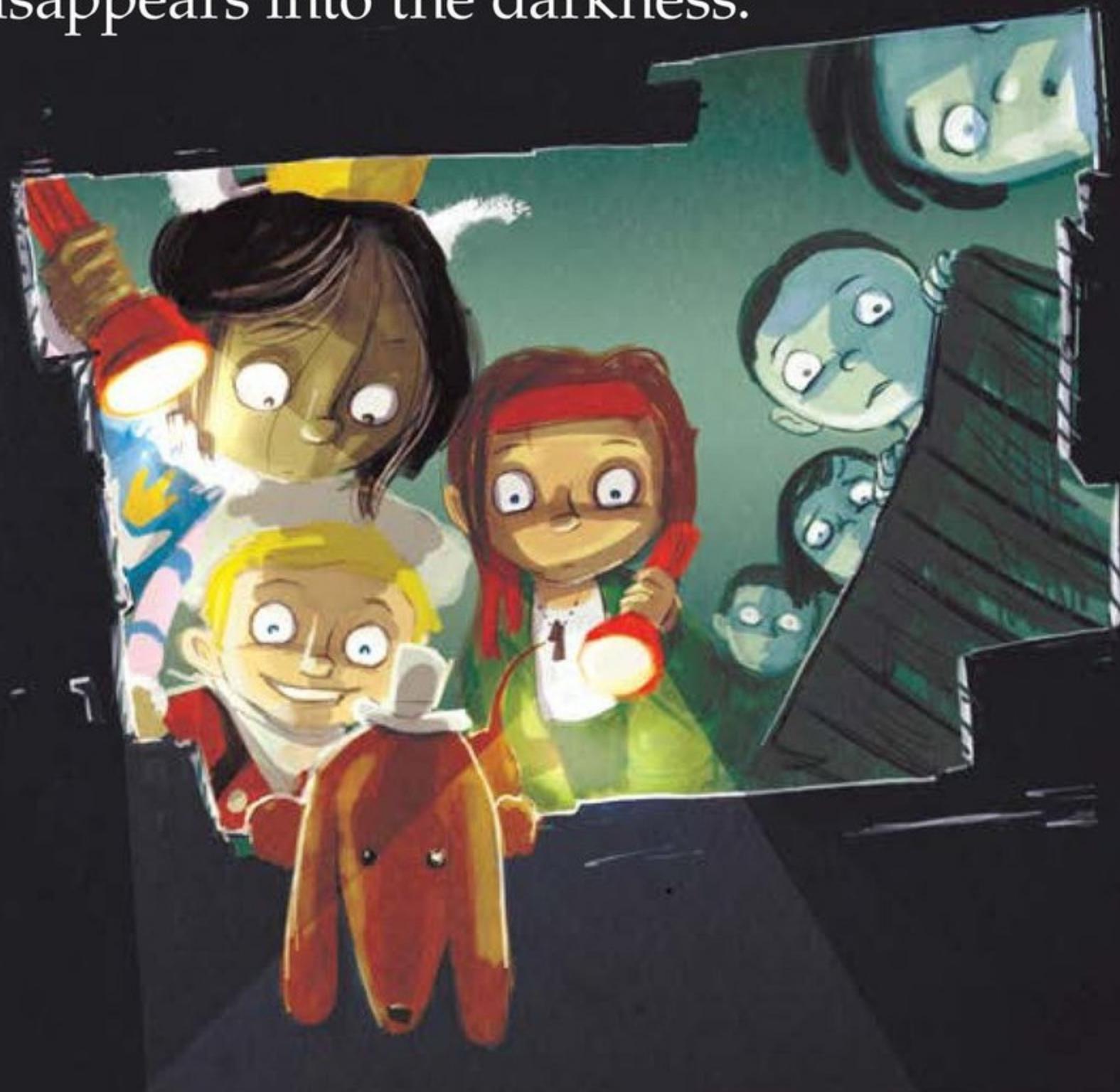


"What are these?" I ask. I show them to Sarah, and she shakes her head, not recognizing them. I flip to the back page, where the handwriting suddenly becomes neat and clear.

"I'm about to step through the door," it reads. "If you find these papers, then I haven't returned. Please tell my brother, his wife, and my wonderful niece, Qynn, that I love them very much." A signature is scrawled across the bottom.

"This is my Uncle Jasper's!" I say, astonished. "What door is he talking about?"

The kids all jump into action, running to a section in the floor and pulling at the corners. With a loud creak, it lifts up. Jake, Sarah, and I shine our lights down. A steep staircase disappears into the darkness.



“Come on!” Thomas says and disappears down the stairs. As usual, Jake and Odie zip after him.

“Jake, wait!” I yell, but it’s too late. We have no choice but to go after them.

We run down the stairs and end up in a **passageway** carved into the rock. Surprisingly, all the children follow us as we run to keep up with Thomas, Jake, and Odie.



The tunnel twists and turns, but we’re running too fast for me to keep track. Suddenly, Thomas stops. Sarah and I try to catch our breath as Jake shines his flashlight around and says, “Hey, we’ve been here before! It’s the Cave of the Lost.”



I look around and realize he's right—the multiple tunnels, the water dripping, and the icy pool are all there. "This is where we found the key," I say, pulling it out of my pocket.

"Put it in there," Thomas says, pointing to the trickle of water.

"Where?" I ask. Thomas continues to point.

I can't see anything in the rock, so I start feeling around. The freezing water runs down my arm, and I shiver. Then I feel it—a small hole, just about the right size for a key.

I hesitate a moment and then stick it in and turn it.

We hear a slight click followed by rumbling, and then the sound of water filling something up.

"Look!" Sarah says. The stone around the keyhole begins to crumble and fall away like **clods** of dirt. The water seems to spread itself out, washing away more and more stone.

Underneath, an ornately carved door appears.

A colorful illustration showing a group of children from behind, looking towards a large, ornate golden door. The door is set into a wall that appears to be falling apart, with shards of stone and debris visible. The scene is lit from behind the door, creating a bright, glowing effect. A large, stylized golden dragon head is partially visible on the left side of the frame.

We stare at it a long time. "Are you going through?" Thomas asks. The other kids echo him.

"What's on the other side?" I ask.

"We don't know," Thomas replies.

Sarah and I look at each other. We know we could go home right now, and everything would be as it was before. We could have normal, happy lives—but somewhere, deep down, we'd always wonder—what's behind the door? Could we have found her mother and my uncle? Could we have brought our families back together?

“I think . . .” I begin, but don’t have a chance to finish.

Jake walks up to the door, grabs the knob, and says, “I wonder where this goes.”

As he opens the door, the cave fills with yellow light, and by the time our eyes adjust, he and Odie are gone.

I shake my head, **exasperated**. The choice has been made.

Sarah and I hold hands as we step into the doorway and begin to fall.



Glossary

abandoned (<i>adj.</i>)	left behind (p. 3)
clenched (<i>v.</i>)	tightly gripped (p. 5)
clods (<i>n.</i>)	clumps or lumps of dirt or clay (p. 14)
exasperated (<i>adj.</i>)	irritated; angry (p. 15)
explore (<i>v.</i>)	to observe and learn about an area by traveling over or through it (p. 3)
frantically (<i>adv.</i>)	acting wildly with emotion (p. 6)
multitude (<i>n.</i>)	a large number of items (p. 8)
nudges (<i>v.</i>)	gently taps or pushes (p. 8)
ornate (<i>adj.</i>)	decorated with great detail (p. 10)
passageway (<i>n.</i>)	a narrow tunnel, hall, path, alley, or route to get from one place to another (p. 12)
pendant (<i>n.</i>)	a piece of jewelry that hangs from a necklace (p. 6)
sorrowful (<i>adj.</i>)	filled with sadness, regret, grief, or anguish (p. 8)

The Return to the Hollow (Part III)
Level T Leveled Book
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Illustrated by Thomas Boatwright

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