



WILLOW
ROSE

4/11

M. KEVIN
HAYDEN

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MUSE
of the MOON
BOOKS

A reddish-orange tint bleeds across what should've been an ordinary twilight sky.

A tattered paper bag skitters down the cracked pavement, spinning in the wind. A busted-out coupe — something from the 1980s, or close enough — rests on a bare rim at the curb. It looks retro-futuristic, like a yesterdecade imagined the future and got it half right.

In the red-orange sky, a fireball burns. Its outline pulses through the cloud cover.

An eye, blazing and alive — watching all below.

It wears its ion tail like a crown of flame jutting upward. Behind it, obscured by its body, trails a bottom golden tail.

Janus — the two-headed god of destruction and renewal. The name given to the comet about to strike the planet Gaia.

A massive harbinger, city-sized and burning, on an unstoppable, oblivious march to end all.

Here in North Columbia, the comet is visible in the evening. The other side of the world won't see the body's approach until the very last moments.

4/11.

Her seventh birthday.

For everyone else, their deathday.

An old arcade storefront hums. Ghostly light spills out of its doors as they hang off their hinges, yawning open as neon flickers and warped arcade noise rings into the street.

Bliip-bliip. Pew-pew-pew.

A song plays inside, which is eerily close to "Sowing the Seeds of Love" by Tears for Fears. The lyrics are wrong, but the melody is nearly identical:

Seven degrees of love...

Degrees of love...

We're climbing the trees...

Sailing six other seas...

So I believe...

Sev-eeeen Degreeees of Looooove.

Graffiti streaks the windows — crude, sprawling tags.

One reads: *Janus rules Ur-Anus.*

Signed: —*Big ssuR.*

A hand-painted sign dangles on the inside of the open glass door:

Help yourself.

—*Ike*

* * *

Inside Ike's Arcade, there is duct-tape-patched gray indoor—outdoor carpeting that stretches wall to wall. Rows of blipping arcade cabinets demand attention. Their cacophony fills the air, nearly drowning out the broadcasts from the TVs perched in every corner. On them, stock footage of peaceful nature scenes accompanied by soft orchestral music.

Not “Brahms’ Lullaby,” but close.

Amber waves of grain sway in the wind, a loop meant to soothe as death breathes down their necks.

They dare not cycle the footage of the tsunamis and collapsed cities.

The arcade is otherwise empty. Some of the machines are smashed, their cash doors hanging open. Ike's final gesture. Free games for all.

In the center of the room, her tiny feet dangle from a stool before a *Jumpman* arcade cabinet.

Her name is Willow Rose.

She stretches her small arms across the console, a bright grin spreading across her face as light shimmers in her lake-blue eyes.

Standing behind her is Ethan Rose. Dad. A tall, lanky, easygoing man in a cardigan. His long red hair hangs loose over his shoulders.

He brought her here to celebrate her last birthday.

They've kept her in the dark about everything. Why burden her little, innocent heart with the fear of death and the loss of everything she loves?

That won't destroy the comet. Even the collective might of the world's governments couldn't do that.

"Maybe I can beat your score, Dad. Look!"

Ethan smiles. “I think you’re right, pumpkin.”

As Willow mashes the buttons, President Matthew Carnegie appears on the TVs to address the nation — similar broadcasts are airing all over the world by leaders to their respective countryfolk.

The president sits on a sofa, his two young boys and wife beside him.

“Dear citizens of the United Lands of Columbia... Comet Janus, discovered just a few months ago... is nearly here.” His voice thickens at the end.

Ethan hurriedly reaches for the nearest TV to turn it off, but another continues playing on the far side of the arcade. The volume is low but still enough to draw Willow’s attention. He leans down to distract her gently.

“Hey... you’re doing it, pumpkin!”

President Carnegie continues with a trembling voice. Ethan hears every word. He chokes back tears as Willow pounds the buttons, leaning into the joystick with all her weight. He has held onto hope. Even up until now.

“As I have expressed before... regretfully... I am sorry that our efforts to save you — your families, our world — have failed.”

Jumpman leaps. His backward-stretched leg catches a rolling barrel. Willow’s game is over.

“Almost!” she laughs. “One more go, Dad? Pleeese!”

Ethan gives a double head shake. “No, baby girl. Then you’ll miss out on... pancakes.”

Willow frowns. “Pancakes?! At night?”

“Yep. Special... just for our birthday girl.”

Willow hops down and pulls at his hand. Ethan lets out a short giggle—just one. Another, and he would break out into a sob.

* * *

Ethan drives while the car radio plays a song that is *not* “Sweet Green Fields” by Seals and Crofts.

The world outside of the vehicle is mostly silent. Lawns and porches are empty.

Inside dimly lit homes, families wait for the end.

Spending their final hours together.

Willow sits in her booster in the rear. Her bright blues gaze out the side window and at the sky. The reddish glow washes across her tiny face and into her blonde hair, catching each strand in an eerie but warm light.

“Dad... you said the sky fire would be over soon. When?”

That’s what they told her. That the bright burning thing would tire itself out, burn away, and give her back the blue sky she knows.

Ethan turns back to the road, then looks out the driver’s side window away from Willow. He comes closer to cracking every time he catches her innocent, searching eyes. They chip away at his guard. He’s never lied to her before.

“Yeah, baby girl. Really soon. Don’t you worry about that....

I can taste the pancakes already, yeah?”

Willow doesn’t answer. Worry ripples across her face as she turns her attention back to the molten

dusk above.

Ethan pulls into the driveway of their small Arts and Crafts-style home. Flowering bushes surround an inviting front porch with a swing.

They spent many evenings sitting here. Willow would rest her tiny legs over Ethan's as he read his paper. Always making sure to pass her the funny pages with a crisp fold. Never wrinkled.

Bright red and yellow aquilegias dangle along the periphery like burning trumpets beneath the twisted twilight of Janus. Their petals glow as though lit from within.

Mara, Willow's mother, meets them as they pull in — short brunette hair, soft brown eyes, and a lean build that gives her a quiet grace. She opens the rear passenger door.

“There's my birthday princess!”

Willow unbuckles her seatbelt and wriggles free. She helps herself down from the seat, stopping her mother's hands with a firm gesture.

“Mom! I can do it.”

Mara flushes. “Okay, I forgot... sorry, baby.”

Ethan circles around the car. He and Mara lock eyes. He gives a small shake of his head.

Mara cups her hands together, fidgeting.

“Okay. Let’s get cleaned up. Actually—no. No need. How about we dive straight into those pancakes... I’m doing something special, and these will be the best ever.”

Willow cuts her off. “Don’t wash up? For dinner? I’m tired of you both being weird. I’m going to wash up.”

She walks up the front steps slowly, her head held low. The faint percussion of her tiny feet echoes through the quiet.

Ethan whispers to Mara, out of Willow’s earshot. “That imaginary friend... you think?”

Mara grips his forearm. “Let her be.” A tear slips down her cheek.

An orange flash, almost like lightning, ignites the sky. The flowers outside flicker like sparklers. A faint ground tremor moves the Gaia beneath their feet.

Ethan pulls Mara close, and together they dart into the house.

* * *

Willow's bedroom is decorated as expected for a girl of seven. She has a bed full of stuffed animals and a framed poster of Shimmer, the purple and sparkly *My Tiny Horsey* — her favorite.

She sits on the edge of her bed, eyes watering as she speaks into the quiet.

“Are you there? Please be th—”

Her whimper cuts short as she hears... no, feels Essie's presence. Her imaginary friend.

“Why do they lie?” Willow whispers. “I know something bad is going to happen. Something really, really bad.”

Essie's voice becomes audible.

“Do not worry — you will be safe. Just like we talked about before. It's time.”

“No... wait.”

“Willow... you will have to trust me.”

Willow’s mouth scrunches as she tries to dam her tears with her cheeks.

“I do... You’re my best friend. My only friend.”

Silence.

Willow calls into the quiet. The room is silent except for the sound of the home settling on tectonically active ground. The micro-tremors started three days ago.

“Hello? You’ll keep us safe... all of us, right?

I know you’re magic. You showed me.”

No answer.

A soft knock sounds on Willow’s bedroom door, and it eases open.

Ethan stands in the doorway.

“Ready, pumpkin?”

Willow wipes her eyes. Her blurred vision clears to see that her dad has also been crying.

“Hey... guess what? Mom even found some blueber—”

He walks toward her as the tremors intensify,

and Mara's scream rings out from downstairs.

“ETHAN!”

Ethan scrambles out of the room, and the door slams behind him. He tries to open it, but all that can be heard are his hands struggling against the knob.

He belts, “Willow! What the — Mara? WILLOW, I'm here, baby — baby girl, open the door!”

The house quakes. Books and toys crash to the floor.

“DADDY!” Willow screams.

The door and walls warp like a lava lamp. Space twists and stretches. Parts of her room simply vanish into thin air.

Willow stumbles to the floor.

She's dazed for a few seconds, then quickly scrambles under her bed.

The walls moan and groan as dust shakes loose from the ceiling. It turns to a fine green color before disappearing completely.

Willow peeks out from beneath the bed and sees a thin crack forming at the base of the wall.

Her *Sloopy Dog* sheets waver in front of her face.

Her chest heaves, and she can hear her heartbeat pounding in her ears.

Willow is cocooned in fear. Warmth runs down her leg.

She jerks — for a split second, she thinks it's something alive, slithering along her skin, not pee.

Heat floods the room.

Followed by sudden cold.

Then heat again.

Then a crushing heaviness, as if the air is pinning her to the floor. She can't even turn her head under its weight.

Nausea tugs at the back of Willow's throat, but she holds it down.

The crack at the bottom of the wall rips open, revealing pitch darkness.

“Daddy!” Willow screams with all her air, her chest contracting — but no sound escapes her lips.

Willow's body feels funny — it doesn't hurt — just strange. As if she were spilled from a bottle, splashing into a puddle on the floor.

A dark void replaces what was once her room.
She hears nothing.
She sees nothing.
Even the sound of her heartbeat is gone.

* * *

Willow feels as if she is floating in a black lake — one that she can breathe in, but can't see through.

A green light blooms in the distance. First a pinpoint, then slowly growing, slipping away from her as it expands. It compels her to follow, which she does.

She doesn't walk— floating, maybe, toward the only light around. She tries to cry for help, but again, only silence leaves her lips... lips she isn't even sure are still there.

A deep but calm feminine voice breaks the silence.

“Willow... my beautiful Willow Rose.”

Willow feels the voice. She feels her own words too, though she can hear neither. Still, she answers.

“Hello? Essie?” she calls for her imaginary friend.
A name that sounds like the letters S.C.

“Willow. Dear heart, feel my words and follow my light. You cannot go back. You will never go back.”

As soon as the thought of her parents starts to form, it fades. She tries to turn back, but can't. Her entire being is locked in and trained to move toward this light. She can't even see the darkness receding behind her.

“But... my —”

“It's quite alright, Willow. You will carry very little from this place with you as you move into the other.”

A silence.

The green light becomes more intense. It spills toward Willow. It's warm. It feels like... peace. Flowing, peace.

Peace is not still.

“Hold to my voice, Willow. Feel my words and follow my instructions.”

The ethereal green light has now flooded the entire space surrounding Willow. She finds herself

bathed in green, vibrant light. She can't find darkness anywhere. And the light doesn't hurt her eyes, it feels like *care*.

“Willow Rose. When you get to this place, though you will not remember most, you must remember your name. Also, remember to find yourself. And when you do...

you must *stay together, always...*

Together, you can keep each other safe.”

Willow feels a sudden coldness, laced with pain, grief, and loneliness.

Apathy.

The hollow burn of being unseen by someone who once loved you.

A loneliness stripped of hope. As the hope of reunion no longer exists.

“Something's here,” she gasps. “It's following us. Something bad. Please, don't leave me alone! Help!” She reaches toward the light — or from within it — reaching for anything.

The friendly voice deepens, reverberating through

her tiny body.

“Willow Rose... remember your name. Remember to stay together... always.”

Those final words drift away, but the green light remains. Willow feels cold and impossibly tired. She closes her eyes as a euphoric warmth spreads through her body, obliterating the chill. Then she drifts away too.

* * *

November 2005. Morningstar Falls, MN. Nightfall.

A bright green light flashes outside of Clara Moreau’s cabin. It washes through her cloudy kitchen windows.

The splintered wood floors tremble.

Clara mutters, “Shit!”

She pushes herself up from her chair at the kitchen table.

She lurches toward the entrance, grabs her

patched overcoat from the hook, and yanks it down as she swings the door open — ready to dart around the back of the cabin unseen.

She says to herself, “Too good to be true. Was a matter of t—”

Her words are snatched from her as she sees a bright, glowing orb of light underneath a group of pines, yards away from the front porch.

For a moment, she nearly runs back inside — until she makes out the faint tracing of a little girl’s face within the glow.

“G’Lord.”

Clara nearly stumbles down the front steps, catching herself on the railing. She tugs her coat tighter across her flannel nightgown, which itself is riddled with holes. She edges closer as her heart heaves her chest in and out.

What she sees confirms her initial sight: a tiny girl lies shivering in a bed of pine needles. She’s surrounded by what looks like a cloudy green apparition. Clara’s blonde hair glows green.

As the light fades, Clara notices the girl's state and quickly snatches off her overcoat to drape it over Willow's body. She has blonde hair like hers.

As soon as the fabric touches her, the green glow slowly simmers down. Then squelches completely.

Overhead, and completely unnoticed by Clara — a comet streaks across the night sky. Behind it, a wide green and glowing tail.

The little girl's eyes flutter open, glowing green at first, then fading like a dying ember. Her irises settle into a deep emerald.

At first, Clara's words are caught.

She takes a deep breath, then bends at the waist.

"Whe—where are your folks, darling? It's freezing out, don'tcha know?"

The little girl's eyes search over Clara's face. She doesn't say a thing, seeming to look for something. She then turns her attention toward the trail behind her. A faint green light pulses in the distance, but Clara is focused on the girl.

"What's your name?"

The little girl's head snaps to Clara.

“Willow Ro—” she pauses. Then turns her attention back toward the trail.

“Willow Roe? Is that your name?”

The girl shakes her head. “Rose. Willow Rose.”

Clara crouches fully. Her fifty-five-year-old knees are more like a thirty-something's. She stays active. It's easy when you're a nomad, always moving from place to place — working odd jobs, renting when that's possible, squatting when it isn't. At the moment, it's the latter. She's been here for over a month, and no one has shown up.

No children for her. She never married, never truly had a relationship. She's what they call flighty — left home at the age of fifteen, when her family gave up on her. They never even reported her missing.

“Willow. Where are your parents? Your mama?”

Willow scans Clara's face. “Mama?”

“Yeah. Your mama. Don't you have a mother? A dad?”

Willow's eyes water. She shakes her head.

“I don’t know.”

Clara’s face scrunches. She feels herself sliding. It’s been a while. She knows this child belongs to someone, and she cannot let herself slide.

This child does not belong to me.

It can...

She can be yours. She doesn’t remember. You don’t have to be alone.

“No... not now,” Clara blurts out.

She leaps onto her feet.

Willow winces, guarding her face with her arm.

Clara’s heart sinks.

“Oh no...

No... I am so sorry.”

Clara holds out her hand.

“I can be your mama. So... so we aren’t out here in the cold on our lonesome. Okay?”

Willow reaches tentatively.

“I have to find myself.”

Clara laughs hysterically. Her face goes from puzzled to deep belly laughter in no time flat.

“Find yourself?” she chuckles. “The story of my life.”

Clara offers her hand again.

“I promise we can find ourselves together, okay? We can stay together. Would you like that?”

Willow perks up. She looks once more down the trail that points north before taking Clara’s hand and following her.

* * *

Willow and Clara step into the one-room cabin. It’s lit with candles. Creepy shadows wiggle on the walls.

Clara drops to her knees beside a wooden chest and flings it open. A heap of matted clothes spills out.

“I know I got something... a gown, a T-shirt or something,” she mutters, digging through the pile.

She turns with a flannel gown — small enough for Willow. Like the grown-up one she’s wearing, this one is riddled with holes. It looks like Clara has kept it her whole life.

Clara slips it over Willow’s head. The girl’s face

pops through the neck opening, her eyes darting around the cabin. Something feels off, but she's too sleepy to name it. Her mouth stretches in a long yawn, a tiny moan catching at the end.

“Oh, sweets... you're exhausted. No telling what you've been through tonight. Here, let's get you washed up and into bed.”

The water from the basin is cold — there's no heat — and the worn gown feels better when Clara pulls it back over her.

Willow's exhaustion lowers every guard. Whatever unease she felt dulls into a distant hum.

Clara leads her to the bed in the corner and lifts her onto it. She tucks a scratchy wool blanket around her and strokes Willow's hair at the temple.

“Goodnight, little bug.”

Clara tiptoes to the kitchen table. The floor and chair creak under her weight.

“Ugh, I'm exhausted myself,” she sighs.

Willow listens as Clara whispers. She isn't talking to Willow, but to someone else.

She has been doing this since they got inside. Even while washing Willow up.

Clara bends, pulling one foot into her lap and massaging it.

“Of course she’s real,” she murmurs. “Somebody’s looking for her... looking for you too.”

Something is wrong with Clara. Maybe. Willow can’t be sure — she barely remembers anything beyond her own name.

But the bed is warm. Safe enough.

Willow’s eyes land on a candle flickering on the bedside table. As the flame dances, a corner of a memory tries to surface, but she drifts off to sleep before it does.

* * *

“Will—”

A pleasant female voice starts the call but is interrupted as Willow wakes up.

She whimpers. ”S.C.?”

It's cold. The scratchy blanket lies at her side. She had thrown it off because it was too itchy.

She opens her eyes to the achy sunlight, then quickly closes them. An afterimage of Clara projects onto the pink screen behind her lids.

When she opens them once more, Clara is sitting in a chair next to the bed, watching her.

It's completely quiet. Not even birdsong.

Clara sits there. No smile, just watching.

A chill spills down Willow's back, and she scurries to the other side of the bed, confused until her brain resets.

She remembers her — the nice lady that helped her. She said the words: *stay together*. This must be where she belongs.

Clara bobbles her head, both hands outstretched.

“Oh n—no, sweetie...”

H—hey. I didn't mean to spook you.”

She leans forward in her chair, which makes a creaking, whining sound.

“Morning!”

Willow looks out the window next to the bed. The sun is shining.

There's something else in the sky too. It's bright, like a *sky fire*.

It feels familiar.

Like a *friend*, but with a different name.

“Hungry?” Clara asks.

Still staring at the glowing orb, Willow nods.

Clara claps her hands once, then springs from her seat.

“Alrighty... oatmeal. I got instant oats aaaand—”

Clara shakes her head, then appears to speak to someone not present, her eyes fixed on the open cupboard.

“No, not you...”

She doesn't understand your language,” Clara rambles, absently shaking a tan packet of instant oats.

Willow searches around, then remembers having a friend no one else understood.

A slight crack opens in her memory.

Clara continues muttering under her breath in

the kitchen. Willow sees the trail from the night before outside of the window. There's something down there. Something calling her from the inside.

After a few moments, Clara walks over to the kitchen table, stirring something in a bowl — still rambling under her breath as she does.

“Okay. Here we go, hot oatmeal...” she turns over the torn paper packet. “Um, peaches and cream!”

Willow climbs out of the bed and walks over to take a seat. She stares down into the bowl. Her stomach grumbles — it actually smells good.

“Okay, bug. I'm gonna take a shower while you eat, okay?”

Willow nods and spoons at her oatmeal.

Clara steps into the bathroom. After a few minutes, she turns on a radio, and the sound of a running shower starts.

No steam billows from under the door. The water stays cold here, and washing up was not fun.

A man's voice can be heard over the radio.

“The origins of Comet Goodwin are unknown. It

is uncertain if it is from our solar system, appearing in a flash.”

Something catches Willow’s attention.

“S.C.?...”

The sky fire.

Willow drops her spoon. She listens for the running water and hears the shower curtain sliding closed.

The radio becomes inaudibly fuzzy before the voices resume.

“Dr. Jo Ann Olson, the respected Harvard astrophysicist and now advisor to President George W. Bush, elaborates.”

Now a woman’s voice speaks from the radio:

“It is quite possible, considering new observations, that this comet could not only be from outside of our own solar system... but I believe... from outside of our own univ—”

Static. A long, scratchy hiss.

Kssh-ksssh.

The station drifts. A jumble of voices flickers through, too fast to catch, then disappears.

“Intergalactic” by the Beastie Boys plays.

Willow jumps down from her chair at the table. She sneaks to the front door, glancing back at the closed bathroom door.

She takes another look, then twists the knob. She sticks her feet in a pair of Clara’s too-big slippers and runs out of the door. Her slippered feet slap the gravel as she runs toward the path on the North side of the cabin.

The path is clear, but it comes to an end at a wall of tall pines.

Willow still feels the tug. She has to go in. She has to see.

She runs into the woods. The excitement gives way to a small sense of regret. She wishes she had a blanket. Even the scratchy one would do.

Also... there could be monsters in here.

She pushes on, not turning back.

An opening with a small house appears ahead.

She steps into the clearing in front of the cabin and hugs herself, shivering. Goosebumps rise along

her arms as she tries to hold in the warmth.

Willow approaches the porch. She can hear soft music coming through the door.

“Ill Wind” by Lee Morgan.

She climbs the stairs and presses her palm against the door.

It feels tingly.

It feels warm.

Her shivering stops instantly as she stands there, losing time.

Willow hears Clara’s call.

“Willow?”

She bolts back into the woods, then out onto the trail. Her feet shuffle as she tries to get back before her secret is discovered.

Willow emerges yards behind Clara, who is halfway down the opposite trail, looking in that direction.

“Here I am!” Willow calls out.

“Oh, thank God! Where were you?”

* * *

The rest of the day passes slowly. It's late November, and twilight creeps in around 4 p.m. Willow sits on the floor while Clara brushes her shoulder-length blonde hair.

Clara smiles without showing teeth.

“You have to be careful, sweetie. We have to *stay together*, or bad things can happen. We can get separated... and I wouldn't want you separated from me.”

Willow's body stiffens.

Her small voice trembles. “Are you me? Or my mother? I don't... remember much.”

“No, silly goose... how could I be you?”

Clara reaches down and tickles Willow's ribs, successfully earning a cackle from the girl, whose feet kick and flutter in front of her.

The ice breaks.

Willow teases at her playful nature, but remains guarded.

Clara beams with a wide smile, one unseen for a very long time. Imagine such an unbalanced face: deep frown lines ripple on her forehead, but there are no creases at the corner of her lips.

“You know... we kind of look alike. We both have this pretty blonde hair. I very well could be your mama,” Clara says in a dreamy tone.

Clara pauses her gentle hair strokes. This is rare, and she often feels the need to fill quiet moments with words, even if they don’t make sense or are irrelevant.

She becomes pensive. *I really can keep her if I play this right. But it would be the wrong play. I should turn her in. Turn her in? She isn't lost loot.*

Not yet. She needs this. It’s cold and lonely, and this little girl has been gifted to her.

Willow breaks the silence. “I’m supposed to find myself.”

Clara’s face ticks. “No. Quiet!”

“I’m sorry.” Willow presses her palms into the floor, as if ready to push away.

“Oh — sorry, little bug... that wasn’t for you. I meant to say, aren’t we all trying to find ourselves?”

Willow tilts her head forward. Clara stops brushing.

She’s going to figure all of this out before then, and you will look like a creep. Like a creepy old maid who held her hostage. Call the sheriff now. Not tomorrow.

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Willow replies.

“Sorry, sweets. I meant, tomorrow we’ll have even more fun. We’ll make it as if it’s your birthday.”

Willow tenses again. “I think... I missed my birthday.”

Clara pauses mid-brush. “When’s your birthday, love?”

“Four and eleven. Yesterday...” Willow hesitates, her voice shrinking. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

“April eleventh... is that your birthday?” Clara probes.

Willow shrugs.

“Sweets, it’s November... Eleven twenty-three.

Yesterday was eleven twenty-two, not your birthday.”

Willow’s eyes drift around the cabin, searching — as though she’s putting pieces together. Clara feels a flicker of unease brewing.

She taps both of Willow’s shoulders softly with her palms, then lifts under her arms.

“Let’s rustle up some grub, eh?”

“Okay,” Willow replies.

After their dinner of black beans and Minute-Rice, Willow asks Clara to play with her hair again.

Clara keeps herself together for the rest of the evening. Something about this little girl has calmed her inner self. Bedtime nears.

She tucks Willow in later that night under that wool blanket. She’s getting used to the scratchiness.

After an hour, Clara decides to climb into the bed herself. She slides behind Willow.

Clara wakes up. She sees the green-tinted night sky through the window. She looks to her left and finds herself alone in bed. The door to the cabin is closed.

“Willow?”

Her voice echoes. No one answers. There is no one else there.

She wipes her face with her hand, takes a moment, then has a realization.

Clara scrambles from under the blanket, then leaps out of bed in a panic.

She bellows, “Willow?”

She fumbles with the doorknob, then snatches it open to find the night.

* * *

Willow races down the dark trail; she’s already halfway to the woods.

The feeling that woke her is calling her. It’s like hearing friends playing outside and scrambling to get your shoes on before you miss something.

Clara calls from behind her, but Willow can’t turn back.

“Willow?”

The end of the trail meets the mouth of the

woods. It's pitch-black between the pines, but tonight Willow isn't afraid.

Instead, she feels a nervous thrill, wanting to return to the cabin with the soft music. The door had made her hand tingle. Something familiar was inside.

It was the only time she had felt truly safe... for as long as she could remember.

She steps between the towering pines, zig-zagging through them as if she's known these woods forever.

A faint green aura appears ahead as she gets deeper. She can see the cabin.

She reaches the opening in what feels like an instant. It's as if the woods have shrunk since yesterday.

Clara's voice has faded far behind her.

Willow steps out and approaches the little cabin. A dim light leaks around the edges of the closed shades.

It's quiet.

No music this time.

A familiar warmth rises up the sides of her neck as she nears the front door. It feels like home — though she doesn't know where home is, and she

knows this place isn't it.

She hurries up the front steps, then slows as she reaches the door. First, she presses her palm against it, waiting for the feeling she had before.

There — the faint tingle.

She leans her ear to the wood.

Footsteps inside. The muffled *thunk* of a refrigerator door closing.

Willow takes a deep breath, curls her tiny hand into a fist.

Then... the tiny fist raps.

Tap-tap-tap.

4/11

A short story prequel to the novel

WILLOW ROSE.

For those who just have to know what came
before the knock.

All heart. No horror.

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