



MARCO POLO

Tyra Renee Chisley

This book is dedicated to my beloved mother, who has been with me every step of the way. You may have passed the age for fairytales and magic, but you sure know how to make my life magical.

~Tyra Renee

Prologue

Willow Woods is everyone's worst nightmare, especially Marlee's. All the stories of people going in and never coming out, and how monsters and ghouls live inside.

Willow Woods is the scary woods from the movies. But when her born daredevil friend has the idea to see what all the hype is about over at Willow Woods, she hesitantly accepts. What she doesn't know is that she is about to have the adventure of her life; one she was definitely not expecting.

One

If you were to know me any better than Bailey and Shawn, you would know that entering Willow Woods is not my idea of “fun”. Of course, as a born daredevil, Bailey would do anything to live up to the phrase “living life to the fullest”. I'm not saying I don't want to live life to the fullest, but I do have different ideas of how I can live life to the fullest. Walking through Willow Woods is not one of them.

When Bailey came up to me earlier today, Shawn waddling behind her, the mischievous grin on her face should have been enough to let me know that whatever she's thinking is going to be something I won't like. The last time she had this signature grin, she asked me to go bungee jumping with her. This was back in the fifth grade, which was only last year. I hesitated. I mean, Bailey is my good friend. I don't want her to remember me as the one boring friend that did nothing but lay on the couch and draw pictures while she was having the time of her life sky diving or skiing down Sierra Peak. But it's not my fault that I would rather draw than skydive and land somewhere where I can severely injure myself, or ski and make a wrong move and break a bone, or even several.

But skydiving and skiing is nothing compared to Willow Woods. The old sycamore trees that border the dark area just give it a scary scene, like the ones in the movies. That's exactly what it was, the scary woods from the movies: The one where people enter and never get out. The one that people fear, and try to never go near in their whole entire lives. The one where Harvey's Cottage lives.

I couldn't exactly explain how Harvey's Cottage looks because I've only seen a blurred picture of it in the newspaper. Dad tells me never to go near it all the time because he knows how Bailey and Shawn have been talking about it a lot lately. I tell Dad all the time how Bailey's daredevil side is starting to go overboard and would be passing the line if she ever talked about going into Willow Woods. Just my luck, the next day at school, she asked me what I thought about it.

“What do you mean ‘what do I think about it?’”

“You know,” she said, “like do you believe all of those stories of people never coming out and things like that?”

I didn't know what to say. I mean, I'm not the person to believe in ghosts and monsters, but the amount of people I know and don't know that went inside Willow Woods and never came out got me thinking that there is something

terribly wrong with the place. But I do admit, it got me curious as well. I mean, who wouldn't be curious? As far as I know, maybe ghosts and monsters are real and live beyond the border of sycamore trees along Willow Woods.

"No," I simply said. I didn't want to start a full-on conversation about this because I knew she was slowly trying to get to the question, "You want to go into Willow Woods with me?"

Bailey smiled and looked back over to Shawn, wearing his signature mischievous grin as well. She faced me again clearing her throat before saying, "Shawn and I have been thinking. Maybe we should go investigate Willow Woods ourselves, see what's *actually* going on over there." My eyes widened. "Are you crazy?" I was about to say no, but Bailey tilted her head, making her milk-chocolate brown hair rest on her shoulder, and furrowed her eyebrows, as if she was confused. I hesitated. She opened her mouth to say something but I interrupted her. "Okay, fine, sure, whatever." Bailey's face wasn't easy to read, and it usually wasn't. She weakly smiled. "You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. I'm positive. Let's do it tonight," I quickly said. My heart started to beat faster. *What the heck is wrong with you!*

"Okay...sure. Um...I guess Shawn and I can meet up at your house?"

"Sounds great," I said. I smiled before quickly turning around and walking away, the bottom of my converse sliding against the linoleum floor.

What did I just get myself into?

Two

“Hey kiddo, how was your day?”

I slowly opened the front door of my apartment and slammed it shut, shuddering as a cold breeze went down my spine from outside. I throw my backpack on the floor then looked up at my dad, who was sitting on the couch, watching TV and drinking a glass of apple juice. It's his substitute for beer, since he stopped drinking.

“It was fine,” I replied, plopping down next to him. He smiled at me, holding up the apple juice for me to see. “I think I've finally stopped.”

“That's good!” I said, the same amount of enthusiasm in my voice as my dad had. I'm the one who suggested that he stop drinking ever since Bailey's mom got pneumonia because of her drinking problem. My dad was all I had ever since my mom died in a car accident.

Dad turned off the TV and sat up, setting his glass on the floor. “So, what do you want for dinner?”

Dinner was the least of my problems right now. I was thinking about telling Dad about the whole Willow Woods thing, but I knew he was going to go crazy about it. He would tell me he thought he taught me better than that.

“I'm not hungry,” I said. Dad furrowed his eyebrows with confusion. “You're always hungry when you get home from school.”

“I know, but today we had a big lunch, and I'm still stuffed from that.” That wasn't entirely a lie. Today's school lunch was bigger than usual. Plus, I was losing my appetite because I was scared about Willow Woods. I probably couldn't eat anyway, even if I was hungry. As long as Willow Woods was on my mind, I couldn't do anything without freaking out.

Dad sighed, looking at me with sympathy, “You okay, kiddo?” I plastered a fake smile on my face and nodded, “I'm doing great, Dad.” I could tell he didn't believe me because he still had that look on his face. I felt bad I had to lie to him. I usually tell him everything, how my day went, what was going on, or anything that happened today that he should know. Willow Woods should be something he should know, but I don't know why I was so scared to tell him.

“Did anything go on at school today?”, he asked. My heart seemed to skip a beat. I opened my mouth to say something, but closed it and just shook my head. I felt like screaming. Hiding things from Dad was not easy. He was going to figure out what was going on sooner or later.

There was an awkward silence between us. I grabbed my backpack from the floor and walked over to my room, not saying anything else. This was purgatory. I didn't want to do this. But as I threw my backpack on the floor of my room and sat on my bed, I suddenly had a realization. *What am I going to tell Dad when Bailey and Shawn come tonight to go to Willow Woods?*

I grab my pillow and throw it across the room with anger. *I am so stupid!*

The pillow ends up knocking over my lamp, and my dad comes running in, "What's going on in here?"

Dad looks over to me, and sees I have a melancholy expression plastered on my face. "What's wrong?"

"I-" It seemed like I couldn't say anything. *Should I lie to him again, or tell him the truth?*

"I realized I forgot something at school," I said, hoping no more questions were going to be asked. I guess I'm going to lie again. Dad tilted his head with obfuscation, "What did you forget?"

"My homework," I answered without thinking. Dad furrowed his eyebrows. "Then let's go back and get it." I shook my head quickly. "No! I'll just ask Bailey what we had. I don't think we had a lot." I zipped open my backpack and pulled out my "missing" homework. "Never mind, it's right here." I nervously laughed, but Dad didn't look amused. He picked up my lamp while shaking his head with disapproval.

Dad ended up leaving, though he gave me a quick lecture about how I can tell him anything, no matter how bad it is. This made my heart come to a halt. I started to feel...guilty. The way his forest green eyes seemed to burn into my icy blue irises, made me feel like he was reading every thought in my mind. And trust me, that was not a good feeling, because all that was on my mind was Willow Woods. I felt like if I thought about it for a second, he would know what was going on immediately, as if he was reading my mind, start screaming at me, wondering why I decided to go there when I didn't even say a word.

I couldn't think while I was doing my homework. Dad decided on hamburgers for dinner, or as he called it, krabby patties, due to my obsession with Spongebob when I was younger. I always laughed when he said that, but not today. I just tried to focus on homework.

"Dinner's ready!" Dad called. I gather the loose papers of my finished homework and neatly stack them up, placing them back in my backpack. As I walk into the kitchen, Dad placed my "krabby patty" onto a plastic plate and set it on the dinner table. It was a small wooden table, possibly to be used as a coffee table instead of a regular one. When my father lost his job, we went bankrupt so getting a dining table was not important, and getting a new job was his number

one priority. He did get another job around six months later, when we were on the brink of losing our apartment. He is now a grocery store clerk. Not the best, he said to me, but as long as it pays the bills, he can work at McDonalds for all he cares.

I quickly eat my burger, not wanting to start any conversations. But I have to say, the “fathers knows best” saying is no joke, because my dad immediately realized something was wrong.

“Kiddo, I know you’re not okay. Tell me what's wrong,” he said. I looked at him, wiping the ketchup off my lips. I then sighed. *You should tell him.*

“I’m going to Bailey’s house tonight,” I said. Once again another lie.

“Really? So why are you upset?” Dad asked. I shrugged. “I just... I don’t know, I really don't. Hormones?”

Dad laughed, shaking his head, “My 12 year old daughter is talking about hormones. This is the part where you need your mother,” he jokingly said. But I knew that when he said “mother”, he felt suddenly sad, or mad, because he pressed his lips together like when he does when he gets mad at me.

I smile nervously at him. “So...can I go to Bailey’s house?”

“It's a school night, you know that right?”

“It will only be for a couple hours. We need to go over some study cards, there's a test on Ancient Egypt tomorrow in social studies.”

Dad glared at me for a second, probably thinking if I should go to Bailey’s or not. She only lived a few apartments away, so I don't think it would be a problem, knowing that I could just walk back from her house. Well, at least that's what Dad knows. The part he doesn't know is that we won't be studying, but instead going into-

“Fine, but be back by eight, no later, you hear me,”Dad said. I nodded. “You're all I've got, kiddo,” he said, “The only thing in this world that I’m still here for.” I nodded again. His voice was a little raspy this time. For a second, I thought he was going to cry, but he didn't. He continued eating his hamburger in silence. I don't know what he was so scared for. As far as he knows, I'm going to Bailey's house to study.

I walked back in my room, laying down on my bed to try to think. By the time Bailey gets here, it will probably be around six o’clock, so we will only have two hours to explore and get back. I fidgeted with the curls of my hair, which I do when I'm nervous. I hated my curly hair, which is my natural hair. It was hard to deal with, and also, the color didn't look good with my skin. While I have tanned skin, my hair is a dirty blonde, so it was lighter than my complexion. It always looked weird to me.

“Someone's at the door!” Dad called. I sat up, looking around. I ran out my room and looked over to see Dad holding the front door open, Bailey impatiently waiting outside. “Didn't you hear me calling you over 50 times?” Dad asked. I shook my head. Bailey started tapping her foot on the ground, which made me look over to her and nervously smile. I walk over to her and looked over to Dad. “I'll see you later?”

“Don't you need your backpack?” he asked. “Oh yeah.” I run back into my room, grab my backpack, and run back into the living room. I walk outside and stand beside Bailey. “See you at eight.”

Bailey and I walk over to her apartment, where Shawn sat quietly against the wall outside. He sat up immediately when he saw us, brushing his chestnut brown hair out his face. He smiled at Bailey, then darted his eyes at me, giving me a weak grin. I gave him a weak grin back, and then looked over to Bailey, who was focused on her keys to her apartment. I knew Shawn liked Bailey since the fourth grade. The only reason why I hang out with him is because I hang out with Bailey, and Shawn hangs out with Bailey as well, so we really are friends only because of Bailey.

Bailey opened her apartment door, and let us all in. “My parents aren't home, not until ten, Dustin left to get some fast food and then go to a friend's house. So we have the apartment to ourselves,” she said. We all walked into her room and sat down on the floor. Bailey pulled out a box from under her bed and took off the plastic top, revealing a bunch of tools and a first aid kit.

“This is my emergency box, for fires and stuff like that. But I think it is highly needed for when we go to Willow Woods.” She took out a flashlight. “We need this to see. I bet you that place is dark.” She took out the first aid kit next. “If any of us get hurt after the monsters chase us.” I gulped when she said that. Why would she say such a thing? Does she want us to back out?

“And finally, some snacks, if we are trapped in Willow Woods for longer than we expect.”

“What are you talking about? I need to be home by eight,” I said, my voice a little shaky. I know I regretted doing this every since I said we should go in the first place, but now I think I should back out for sure.

“Did you really think we were just going to walk in Willow Woods, look at some sticks, have a little party, then leave? No, that place is dangerous, we may stay there for *days*. Even weeks.”

I sat up immediately. “I don't want to go anymore.” Bailey shook her head. “What are you talking about? We are in this together.” I shook my head. “I can't. I need to be here with my dad,” I grabbed my backpack, but Bailey grabbed my wrist and pulled me down. “Come on! Don't be a chicken.” I stopped, and glared

at her. "You're really going to chicken out?" Bailey asked, "After you've gone this far?"

I sighed, sitting back down. Bailey smiled, then proceeded to grab snacks out of the box. Hot Cheetos, Orange Soda, Takis, Pop tarts...

"Don't you think we should get something that we could live off of?" Shawn said. "If we do end up staying there for weeks, we can't live off of junk food. We will die."

Bailey chuckled, looking at Shawn. "Oh Shawn, if we do stay there for weeks, we won't live for three days of it. I'm packing but if we are staying for a night, we are goners after that."

I was starting to think Bailey was trying to scare us. Before I can question her, she grabs my backpack and dumps all of my things out.

"Hey! What was that for?"

"We need your backpack to store everything," she said, stuffing all of the objects inside my bag. She zipped it up and looked at me and Shawn, with her mischievous grin on her face and said, "Let's roll."

I snatched my backpack from her without warning. "It's my backpack, I get to hold it," I said, before she could complain. "One more thing!" Shawn said, making me and Bailey turn our attention towards him. He stuffed his hand in his pocket, and then took out a Polaroid camera. "If we get footage of any monsters and come back alive, we could be heroes," he said. He stuffed the Polaroid in the backpack.

We walk out the front door, walking slowly down the street. The sun was barely setting, the sky a mixture of pink and orange. A line of cirrus clouds were streaked along the sky, as if they were painted on. It looked so unreal. If I wasn't having such anxiety over Willow Woods, I would admire the sky a little longer.

Bailey led the way, Shawn behind her. I was last, following closely behind Shawn. He would occasionally look back at me, seeing if I was still there or not. He kept a sincere face the whole time.

I always had the feeling that Shawn hated me, ever since he started hanging out with Bailey and me. He always sent me evil eyes and teased me a lot. Bailey always tells me he is joking, but he does hurt my feelings a lot of the time.

I'm not going to lie. I do think Shawn is very good-looking with his chestnut-brown hair, tanned skin, and beautiful hazel irises, and even the small details like the birthmark on his arm, which you can only see when he wear short sleeve t-shirts.

"We are almost there," Bailey said. By now, we were in a large field right next to the interstate freeway. The sound of moving cars became less faint as we ran deeper and deeper in the field, which was encumbered with an unbelievable

amount of sticks and rocks. We stopped running at a row of sycamore trees. Willow Woods.

I gripped the straps of my backpack, taking a deep breath. I've gone this far, so there is no going back now. I looked over to Bailey, who had the hood of her hoodie covering her face. She mumbled, "Let's go," then slowly walked into the dark area.

I set down the backpack, unzipped it, and then pulled out the flashlight. I ran my hand around the sides till I felt a small bump, then pushed it, assuming it was the button. A bright yellow light immediately appeared, shining what seemed like a mile into Willow Woods. I quickly zipped up my backpack and put it back on my shoulders, running to catch up with the rest of my friends.

We walked a bit, shining the flashlight at whatever looked interesting, or if we couldn't see in front of us. Bailey didn't say much as we walked, but instead gripped the sides of her hood, as if trying to make sure it didn't fall off her head. Her hair covered the front of her face. She kept her head down and looked at the ground the whole time.

"Are you okay, Bailey?" I asked, starting to walk beside her. She turned her head away from me, not allowing me to see her face. I frowned. I knew something was wrong, but I didn't know what.

"I'm fine, thanks," I heard Bailey mumble. She started to walk faster, till she was a few feet in front of me. I sighed and just continued walking, till Shawn came next to me. "What's up with her?"

"I honestly don't know. She never acted like this," I said. All of a sudden, there was a faint sound of what sounded like horse hooves, galloping closer and closer. I look at Shawn, whose face was a few inches away from mine, giving me chills. I felt his breath on my face, and I'm sure he probably felt mine. He stared into my eyes, which also sent shivers done my body. Just like Dad, I felt he could read my thoughts too. Not a lot of people stared at me the way Dad did, and now, Shawn was one of those people.

"You guys!" I heard Bailey yell. I turned my head away from Shawn, and see Bailey pointing to left. I turned to see a horde of horses galloping towards our way. I gasped. "Run!"

We sprinted the opposite way of the horses, jumping over tree stumps and roots. Sticks and branches kept poking my bare ankles. Now, I was regretting that I wore shorts that day. I looked back, hoping to see that the horses were gone, but my vision went blurry, because I started to fall.

I screamed as I tripped over a tree stump, falling on my face. My hands scraped on the ground as I tried to stop myself, but failed. I laid there on the

ground, not able to move. "BAILEY!" I called, hoping someone would realize I was gone and run back to help me. "SHAWN!"

My vision was blurred from hot tears, and to make matters worse, I heard the gallops once again. I gasped and looked back, to see the horses still coming closer. "HELP!" I hollered. I hoisted myself up on my elbows and crawled to a nearby tree, which had a small hollow space for me to fit my body and hide. I looked at my hands, which had cuts all over them and were bloody. My legs were also bruised, and I had a huge cut on my left knee. I couldn't even imagine how bad my face looked, since my face was planted on the ground.

I closed my eyes, praying this would all stop, praying that this was a dream. The horse sounds were becoming fainter and fainter every second. Soon they were so loud, I had to cover my ears with my hands. But that didn't really help.

I opened my eyes to see thousands of horses running in a tight pack. Hot tears streamed down my face as I wondered where Bailey and Shawn were. *I hope they are okay.*

They were all gone in less than two minutes, leaving nothing but silence, other than the sound of crickets. *Chirp, chirp, chirp.*

I sat there in the hollow of the tree, a million thoughts running through my head. But at the same time, I wasn't thinking about anything. I didn't know what to do. I looked around the dark place, realizing that I dropped the flashlight while I was running. My hands were numb. I couldn't feel my fingers and I felt blood from my nose run over my lips. My Converse were now covered in holes and my ankle socks were ripped. The shirt I had on was dirty and ripped from falling, and my white shorts were now black from dirt. Because I used my elbows to crawl over to the tree, they were now scratched up as well as the rest of my body. There was nowhere for me to go, nothing for me to do, and no one there to help me. I was lost in Willow Woods; the worst nightmare I could ever dream.