

HIDE AND SEEK

It was supposed to be Ella's best birthday yet. Her 15th was perfectly planned—cake, music, and games. The original four, Molly, Ella, Addy and I were all excited to make new memories.

The night was still young, and already filled with laughter and the scent of birthday cake. We were exhausted already, but we all knew what was coming: hide and seek. Every year, we'd play, each of us hiding, trying to be the last one discovered.

Molly volunteered to count. We scattered in different directions. "One, two, three..." she began.

I looked around, expecting Ella to be nearby. Usually, she'd take her time looking around for the best hiding spot, then run off, but she was nowhere to be seen. Maybe she had already found a hiding spot? But as Molly's counting continued, unease settled in.

Addy ran toward the bushes, laughing, and I climbed up into the treehouse as quietly as I could. The lights and the shadows around me looked almost unnatural in the dark.

"Forty-nine, fifty!" Molly's voice grew louder. Ella never stayed hidden for long. She loved being found, always.

Molly called. "Ready or not, here I come!" The game had set afoot.

I remained hidden in the treehouse, but my eyes kept darting toward the house, then to the back gate, then to the corners of the yard, but I still couldn't see Ella.

Molly suddenly called out, "Addy! Rose! Where are you?" her voice bright. I heard her approach the bushes where Addy was, and then Addy's laughter filled the air followed by Molly's. There was still no sign of Ella.

I slowly climbed down from the treehouse, my stomach full of butterflies. "Molly, have you seen Ella?" I asked, walking over to her.

Molly turned to me, confused, "What do you mean? Ella's here, we just have to find her"

But suddenly, I wasn't so sure. "I'm not sure," I stuttered, "I don't know, something just feels off."

We both started calling her name, louder now. But the yard felt wrong, like it was too big, then suddenly too small. The lights shone in their usual way, but the shadows seemed deeper tonight, and the air felt thick.

Addy joined us, her face turning serious. “What’s going on? Where’s Ella?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, my voice rising, “I just.....”

Addy’s brow furrowed, then relaxed. “Stop messing around,” she laughed, but her voice lacked its usual upbeat tone. “This isn’t funny.”

“I’m not joking,” I cried, “She’s gone, she’s missing! She’s not here!”

We searched the yard once again, calling Ella’s name even more loudly now, desperation creeping up on us. The moon hung low, casting long, ugly shadows over everything. In my mind, it seemed like something in the yard had swallowed Ella whole. Ella wasn’t hiding any more— I didn’t think she wasn’t even part of the game anymore. She was just... gone.

Minutes turned into hours, and soon, even the police got involved. They scoured the neighborhood, questioned neighbors, asked people in the local community if they had seen Ella, and even checked the local woods. But there was still nothing. No footprints, no trail, no indication that she had even left. No Ella.

By the time the party was supposed to end, the air had shifted. The backyard, that was once filled with happiness and joy, now felt desolate and alone. The lights still glowed softly, but they only made the darkness feel deeper. Addy, Molly and I stood there in the yard, unable to comprehend in our minds what had just happened. Ella—our Ella—was missing.

It’s been weeks since that night. The police haven’t found anything. I still think about her every day, wondering if maybe she’s hiding, still waiting for us to come find her. But, somehow I know, deep down, that isn’t true. That Ella disappeared that night. No one knows why or how, and it doesn’t make sense. But I know, in my heart, that Ella is gone. And that makes me absolutely terrified.

Sometimes, late at night while I lay in bed, I can still hear her laugh, loud and clear, in my mind. And, I still want to believe that she’s still waiting for us to find her, like she always did. But I can’t shake the feeling that the game—hide and seek—had a strange, and a darker twist that night. That somehow, one of us, one of our best friends, had hidden too well—and would never be found again.

Word count- 750