

passages

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The iron gates hung open and broke the tree line along the road like the great gaping mouth of some unseen monster. As the car slowed down, the gentle clicking of the blinker filled the silence, and Lily May's heart skipped a beat. The maroon sedan turned and passed a small stone building with an oxidized copper plaque declaring they had arrived at McMillan School for Boys. If Lily May hadn't spent the better part of the ride listening to the calming thoughts of the man who had been here before, the maw of iron and the lichen covered gatehouse would have been intimidating. Instead, she found herself sitting up taller in the back seat, vying for a better look at her new home.

The drive had taken all night and the better part of the morning. Having never left Sussex County before, Lily May was mildly disappointed the scenery had been cloaked in darkness for most of the trip. The moonless night and gentle hum of the engine had lulled her to sleep about the same time the thoughts of the men escorting her had begun to wander aimlessly and provide no more details.

Until then, their minds had been a cornucopia of information.

The two men in the front seat, wearing suits

like required uniforms rather than tailor-made decisions, thought of everyday things—their wives and children, their paychecks, and the boat one of them hoped to finally have enough to purchase. The man with the shiny cowboy boots, who had introduced himself as Mr. Erne, sat in the back seat with Lily. He was *not* government, as the detective had thought, and was as eager to hear her talk, as she was to listen to his *inner* voice and the secrets he might hold.

Mr. Erne had spoken with Lily May's mamma and meemaw for over an hour in their humble living room, enjoying stale cookies and fresh iced tea, while discussing Lily May's *abilities*. He had heard her outlandish testimony regarding her kidnapping and rescue. And he had believed *every single word* the young girl had blurted, mumbled, or otherwise shared. His desire was to help her learn to both control *and* freely use her abilities, at what he referred to as an *educational playground for gifted children*. Lily May heard his thoughts and knew he truly believed it was a good place, good enough to trust with his own family members.

Sussex County had been afraid of Lily May since she was little, and the three adults discussing her life soon agreed it was best for her to leave fear behind, even if it meant leaving family. He handed her mamma a thick envelope and a folded piece of glossy paper, promising they could visit whenever they wished.

She packed the only important possessions she could think of in a tiny brown battered

suitcase borrowed from her mamma—a suitcase she'd only ever seen in her parents' room, but never witnessed being used. Even though Mr. Erne claimed they would provide clothing and toiletries, Lily May packed a handful of outfits, including her favorite summer dress and the matching pajamas she had made in stitching class. She grabbed the cracked, framed picture of her parents—taken long before her birth at someone's backyard barbeque—and placed it on her folded clothes, before covering it with the thin quilt her meemaw had made for her. She looked around her small room at the things she was leaving behind. She palmed her beat up Bible—a present from Pastor Jacob when she'd graduated from Sunday school to regular church in seventh grade—and added it to the suitcase before closing it. She hugged Mamma and Meemaw, twice each, through tears of hopeful anxiety, and waved good-bye to the only home she'd ever known.

The first leg of the journey was filled with questions and answers—*some* spoken. Mr. Erne asked, Lily May answered, and then Lily May often heard his internal reactions. He wasn't afraid of her, which felt both foreign and wonderful to Lily May. He was pleasant and seemed nice, but he had a sadness to him that had softened, like aged pain you've grown accustomed to. She heard his thoughts of missing his wife, Bree—lost while giving birth to their daughter. He was sad. But he so *absolutely* adored his daughter—making her his number one priority—even his sad thoughts were washed with happiness. She

almost immediately, instinctively, trusted him.

Tommy wasn't convinced yet.

Tommy had sat unseen by Mr. Erne throughout the drive. He alternated between a crouched position on the center hump of the backseat floor and boldly sitting between them, as if providing a barrier for Lily May against the man. Lily May was pleased Mr. Erne fully believed in Tommy, even though the man couldn't see her young ghostly companion. Mr. Erne had even asked if Tommy would be joining them when they stopped for dinner.

"Mister," Lily May giggle-snorted and shook her head. "He don't eat nothing no more."

"He's still welcome to sit with us." Lily heard the unspoken rest of the sentence, clear as day. *I'm sure he stays close anyway.*

"Actually, he used to like to wander 'round like a little adventurer—calls himself Huck Finn, 'cos I had to read it for school last year, so I did out loud to him. He would tell me tales of what he'd seen while we were apart." Her smile beamed. It was the first time in her life she'd showed off her talents for hearing thoughts without worrying about the repercussions of fear, hate, or shame.

Mr. Erne nodded and grinned back, his mind suddenly full of names and the notion *they* would all adore her.

"Who are *they*?" She questioned, as she reached down to fetch the shoes she'd kicked off before they'd even pulled off the worn patch of grass Papa referred to as their driveway.

“The other children at McMillan. You’ll meet them all soon enough, Little Lady.” His smile was kind and reassuring.

“And they’re like me?” Lily May wondered how many had died to gain their abilities like Tommy had, and how many were like her—born with it.

“Yes. Maybe? I guess it depends on exactly what all you can do. According to what you told the detective, you can hear the thoughts of the living and communicate with the dead.”

“*Communicate* sounds so fancy. I just talk with ’em, and they talk back. I help ’em talk to family if that’s what they want.” Lily May shrugged. “The living though? That’s usually just hearing turmoil or excitement. Like if they’re emotional or something. *Regular* stuff is like little whispers tickling behind my ears, so I can *almost* tune them out completely to make the world quiet. But if I *wanna* hear all the boring stuff, I gotta try harder and let my inside get real quiet. Them emotional things though? I can’t almost ever stop them. That’s as good as screaming it right at me.”

He sat back in his seat. Lily May recognized his expression as what Papa called *chewing on them words*.

They ate at a small diner on the side of a busy stretch of road, Tommy sitting on the foot rail under the counter watching them. Lily May meticulously pulled the crust from her grilled cheese before devouring it, repeatedly dipping the edge into a spot of ketchup meant for her

French fries. Under the bright lights of the diner booth, Lily May noticed Mr. Erne's hair was almost the same color as his cream shirt, but the honey and silver in his mustache and goatee told her it was dyed to cover those gray hairs. She declined dessert, not wanting to be a bother or take advantage, but Mr. Erne had ordered some to go. Back in the car, with a piece of rhubarb pie in a Styrofoam box, they headed into the darkness of night, and the minds around her quieted.

Lily May awoke some time after the sun had risen, when they left the steady hum of concrete and blacktop for the curves and bumps of less maintained backroads. The woods appeared thick at first glance, but when she squinted, she realized it was only a barrier, nothing more than a thick strip of evergreens and oaks. As the sun rose higher and illuminated the thin spots, fields, occasional farmhouses, and other buildings could be seen hiding behind the canopy.

Home.

Lily May heard Mr. Erne's thought and turned to see an expression of relief on his face, as if he'd missed the building itself.

He met her gaze as they drove through the gate. "Welcome to McMillan Hall."

"But the plaque?" Lily May held her thumb out to indicate the little stone gatehouse behind them, which had said *School for Boys*.

"Ah yes, originally it *was* a school for boys, but things have changed. We just call it a hall

now. You'll learn that and much more once we get you settled."

The trees opened up and Lily May saw in person the grounds and building she'd only previously pulled from Mr. Erne's mind. The driveway led to a large circular roundabout, the inside boasting lush grass and several flowering bushes with a tall gray statue on a white pedestal standing above it all at the center.

"Mrs. McMillan herself." Mr. Erne provided as he pointed toward the statue, his eyes wandering across the building rather than focusing on the statue.

"Missus?" Lily May hadn't even considered the school could be named for a woman, but Mr. Erne either didn't hear her question or was too busy in the myriad of thoughts running through his mind. She squinted at the statue and saw it was indeed a woman, wearing a two-piece skirt and jacket like in the old movies, a small hat on her head, and her hands folded demurely in front of her against the folds of her skirt.

Looking away from the statue to the grounds around it, Lily May's gaze followed a narrow road as it branched off the roundabout to the right. She saw it forked near the corner of the hall, one tine continuing toward a smaller building set further back in the expansive, neatly trimmed grounds, the other disappearing around the side of the building, presumably wrapping around to the back. The car came to a stop in front of the building. Straight ahead, left of the main building, Lily May could see the

entrance for a parking area, which broke free of the roundabout and currently held a handful of vehicles, including two large, white, passenger vans with navy lettering on the side simply stating McMillan.

Engrossed in her surroundings, she hadn't heard Mr. Erne exit the car or the quiet click of the trunk latch being released. The slamming of metal behind her made her jump and she turned to see Mr. Erne, with her suitcase in his hand, opening the door for her.

Lily May stepped out and looked past Mr. Erne to the building itself, her head tilting further and further back as her gaze continued upward. A set of wide stone stairs led from the roundabout to the richly colored wood of the massive front doors. The stone building spread out from its entrance, depositing windows along the arms, which stretched a hundred feet in either direction and rose up two taller than normal stories. A third story sat only above the center of the building, graced with an oversized clock stopped at two forty-five. She didn't know if it had broken during the day or the middle of the night, but Lily May knew the time was wrong, as the sun hadn't yet passed noon in the sky.

The door shut behind her and the car drove off, bypassing the parking lot to continue out to the main road and disappear. Lily May realized the men in the front seat were escort only and understood why their thoughts hadn't provided anything about the school. In the car's absence,

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there were no city sounds, or noises from a busy road. The grounds were silent, except for the chattering of squirrels and songbirds. Off the beaten path, erected somewhere deep in the countryside of northern Pennsylvania, McMillan Hall was a hulking stone monument to peace of mind.

Or so Lily May hoped.

This has been an excerpt of book 2 of the Wilted Lily series, available in ebook and paperback.

The story began in book 1: Wilted Lilies...

Visit her official website for more information on this series and other fiction by Kelli Owen.