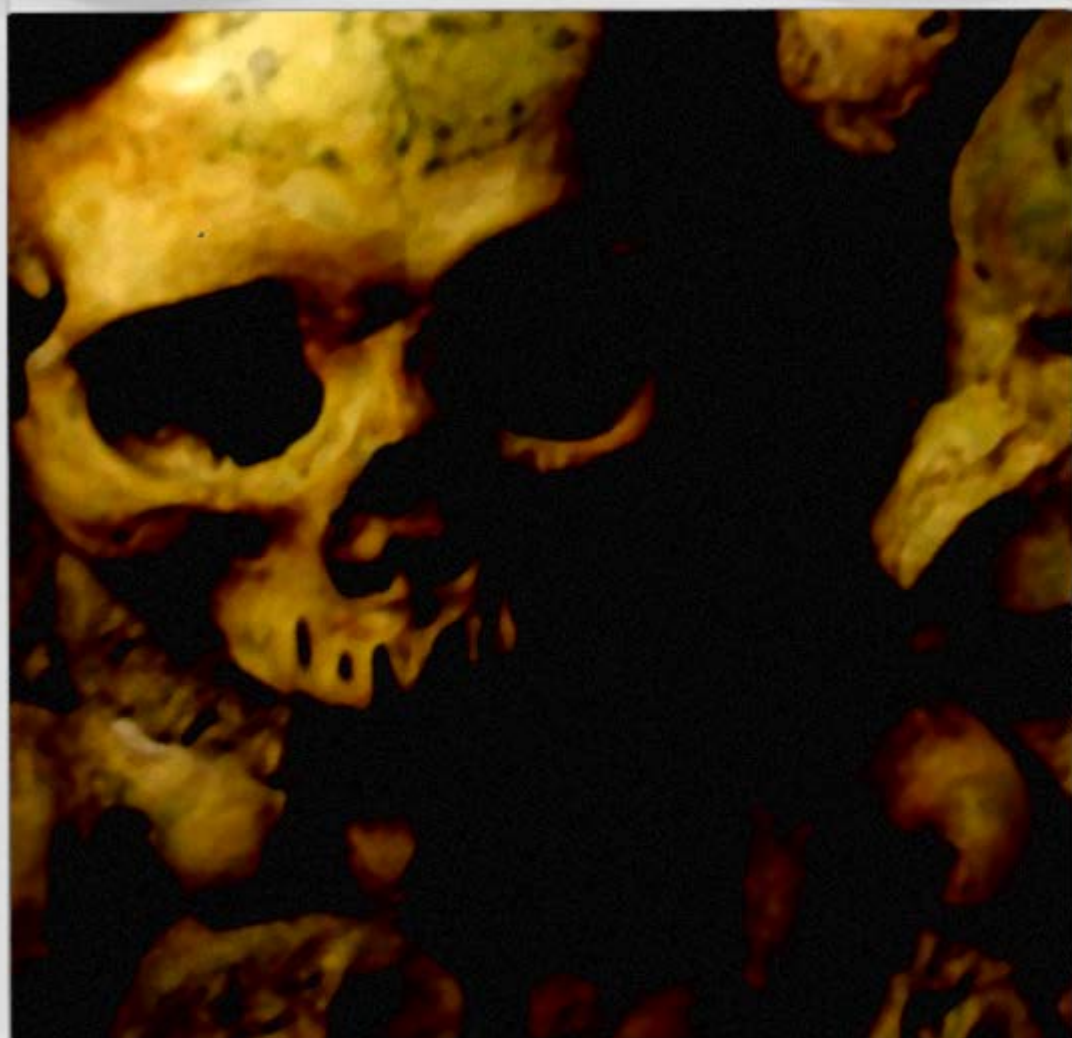


barry j. hutchison



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*the bone house*

"a teenage serial killer played out with echoes of Texas Chainsaw Massacre. What's not to love?" - David Gatward

**The Bone House**

By Barry J. Hutchison

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## One.

The bell rang. The doors opened. The rest of Laura Heath's school exploded out into freedom and fresh air, followed eventually by Laura Heath herself. She jammed her Apple-white earphones in her ears, then shoved both hands into the front pocket of her faded Batman hoodie. Her battered Doc Martins scuffed down the steps and into the start of the summer.

A mist of fine drizzle dampened her hair and slicked her forehead. She snapped her hood up like a cowl. *Summer. Yeah, right.*

Six weeks without school. Completing *Skyrim* would take two or three, tops, including all the side quests and random caves she hadn't tackled yet. That left three or four weeks to fill any way she liked. She dodged through a Saturn's ring of shiny happy students. Three or four weeks.

Maybe she'd start *Skyrim* again.

There were a few more dense flocks of pupils to push through before she hit the main gate. She heard her name called once or twice, even over the sound of *Roses for the Dead* by *Funeral For a Friend* blasting in her ears. She nodded in reply, accepted and returned a couple of end-of-term high fives, and pushed out into the street.

Considering their rush to get away, most of the student body seemed intent on hanging around near the school. The throngs began to thin the further she got from the gates, and by the time she turned onto the next street she was the only living soul in sight.

The iPod shuffled and *Video Killed the Radio Star* saw her to the end of the road, past the shops and onto her own street. *Blondie's Call Me* kicked in, but she hit the pause button on her earphone cable. There wasn't time to reach the end of the track before she reached her house, and leaving a song half-finished always made her feel anxious. She'd be the first to admit that was probably weird, but what could you do?

Her house was the third in a block of five, slap bang in the middle. The block marked the start of a large council estate, but it wasn't like the ones you saw on TV. She'd never met

a drug dealer – at least, not that she was aware of - and the only gang in the area was made up of an ever-changing roster of six-year-olds on shoogly bikes.

The front gate was tied shut with a loop of wire. The catch worked perfectly, but somehow the family dog had figured out how to operate it, and the wire was the only way of keeping him in.

The moment she lifted the loop, Kermit began to bark somewhere inside the house. She never understood how he knew the wire had moved, but he always did. Radar, she guessed. X-Ray vision at a push.

“Hey.”

The voice came from across the road. Cethan Leahy pulled up on his bike, braking just hard enough to raise his rear wheel a few centimetres off the pavement. Apart from the six-year-olds, Cethan was the only person Laura knew who even owned a bike. He rode it everywhere which, for a seventeen year old, could have been asking for trouble. No-one ever took the mickey, though, because Cethan was almost supernaturally likeable. He was champion of the local boxing club, and could run faster than everyone in school, too, which also helped.

“Hey there,” Laura replied. Her cheeks burned. *Hey there?* Had she really just said *Hey there?* She looked at her right arm and realised she was waving, too. Dear Zod, why was she waving? She whipped her hand down to her side and used her other one to pin it in place. “Alright?” she mumbled, doing what little she could to salvage the situation.

“Not bad, thanks.” Cethan hopped off his bike and landed in a perfect dismount beside it. He lifted the bike over the fence and into his own garden before turning back to her. “Summer holidays,” he said.

“That it is,” Laura nodded. Cethan had moved into the house with his family a few years previously, and had immediately started speaking to her as if they’d grown up together their whole life. She remembered her disappointment when she discovered he spoke to virtually everyone else the same way.

Cethan moved to cross the road, then stepped back as four six-year-olds cycled by, ringing their bells. He saluted them and watched until they rounded the corner, but didn't try to cross again.

"What you up to?"

"When?"

"Right now."

Laura tried a nonchalant shrug, but she couldn't be sure that she quite pulled it off. Her heart thumped loudly in her ears. "Not much. Why?"

Cethan glanced in both directions along the road, then leaned in slightly, as if imparting some great secret. His dark eyes sparkled and a smirk tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Want to see something cool?"

Laura pretended to think about this. How long was reasonable before answering, she wondered? Three seconds? Ten? She settled on six, then looped the wire back over the fence post. Inside the house, Kermit fell silent once again.

"OK," she said, aiming to sound as if she couldn't really care either way. She very nearly pulled it off. "Why not?"

## Two.

Cethan refused to give anything away as they made their way through the estate. Instead, he bombarded her with questions about her plans for the summer. Was she going away anywhere? (No.) Did she have a holiday job lined up? (No.) Did she plan going to any of the summer activity schemes the council was running? (She'd rather die.)

She contemplated telling him about her *Skyrim* intentions, but when he started talking about his plans for camping and canoeing and a bungee jump in the south of France, she decided to keep her mouth shut.

Anyone else would sound as if they were gloating, but not Cethan. Never Cethan. He was matter-of-fact about it all, as if everyone did it – and if they didn't... well, then that was a perfectly valid choice, too.

Cethan made everyone feel so damned comfortable. Most of the time, anyway. Right now, with her heart beating fast and her stomach fluttering and him *just right there*, Laura was about as far from comfortable as you could get.

He led her all the way through the estate, past the garages she used to climb on as a kid, past the primary school and the bus depot and the bookie's. She glanced in the window, but her dad wasn't there. Unusual for a Friday, but then he had been getting a lot better lately.

They came out at the back of the other shops, right by the canal. Beyond the line of grey water the forest began. A regiment of trees towered above the buildings on this side, as if industry and nature were facing off in one final winner-takes-all battle. A thousand Scots Pines versus a handful of houses and a run-down *Spar*. It didn't really seem like a fair fight.

Cethan made for the bridge leading to the path on the other side, and she followed without question which, if she were honest, annoyed her a bit. They reached the wire fence that bordered the edge of the woods. Cethan sat on the middle horizontal wire and pushed the top one upwards for her to go through, like a trainer helping their boxer enter the ring.



Instead, she leaned a hand on the next post along and vaulted over. Her boots squelched down into a carpet of wet moss. A moment later, Cethan appeared beside her.

“It’s up here,” he said, gesturing into the woods. The trees were close together, their branches tangling, their leaves interlocking to form a thick canopy overhead. The grey daylight seeped through in patches, lifting the worst of the gloom, but it didn’t look particularly inviting.

“Going to tell me what it is?”

Cethan smiled. “Not yet,” he said. “Trust me, you’re going to want to see if for yourself.”

Laura peered up into the forest. It rose sharply up a steep hillside. “This had better be worth it,” she said, then they began to climb.

“It is. It will be,” Cethan said. “As soon as I saw it, I thought of you.”

“Oh?” Laura said, non-committal.

“I knew you’d love it. You know, with the whole Goth thing?”

She shot him a withering look. “I’m not a Goth.”

He looked genuinely surprised. “Aren’t you? Oh, right. I mean... So how come you wear the Batman stuff.”

“Because I like Batman.”

Cethan nodded. He looked flustered. She’d never seen him looking flustered. It was annoyingly endearing. “Yeah, well I mean, who doesn’t? Except, you know, the Joker and Man-Bat and all that lot, obviously.”

Laura’s heart skipped a beat. *Man-Bat*. He’d even heard of *Man-Bat*.

“So, you’re not a Goth. Are you an Emo?”

“No.”

Cethan stopped. Laura was a few paces up the hill before she realised. Cethan’s forehead furrowed. “So... what are you, then?”

Laura shrugged. “I’m not anything.”

He looked long and hard at her, and even the birds chirping in the high trees seemed to fall silent. "Ah now, I wouldn't say that," he smiled, and then he was off marching up the hill again, calling for her to get a move on.

The drizzle had either stopped or couldn't make it past the canopy of branches overhead. Laura pushed down her hood, swept a strand of hair behind her ear, then followed in Cethan's footsteps. She bit her lip. She had never giggled girlishly in her life, and she was damned if she was about to start now.

They carried on for twenty minutes or more, Cethan leading the way. It quickly became clear that he wasn't entirely sure where he was going. He zig-zagged through the trees, stopping regularly to peer in all directions as if trying to find something he recognised.

It was a few minutes after one of these pit stops that he came to an abrupt halt directly in front of Laura. She almost walked right into him, getting close enough to feel the heat radiating from his back.

The hike up the hill had been hard going. Her t-shirt was clinging to her spine and she was panting like a racehorse doomed for the knacker's yard. Not a good look by anyone's standards.

"Watch it," she mumbled, and Cethan turned to face her. He was smiling again, but he shuffled uneasily from foot to foot.

"We're here," he said, sticking a thumb nail in his mouth and gnawing on it nervously. "I want you to promise me something."

"What?" she said.

*Anything*, she thought, then she mentally punched herself in the face.

"Promise that when I show you what I'm about to show you, you won't freak out."

She didn't say anything, just nodded. Cethan nodded back. "Right," he said, then he turned and led her the final few metres into the darkening woods.

## Three.

A house stood half-hidden by the trees. Or rather, not so much half-hidden as half-claimed. Its crumbling stone walls were held up by moss and creeping vines. The roof looked to be mostly intact, but the carpet of green that covered it made it difficult to say for sure. The windows had been boarded over, the wood long-since marbled by damp and decay.

"It's a house," said Laura, flatly.

"It's a house," Cethan agreed.

"You brought me all the way up here to show me a house."

Cethan shook his head. "No, I brought you all the way up here to show you what's *inside* the house."

Laura stared at the ruined building pinned in place by the trees. "The Blair Witch?" she guessed. Cethan laughed, and for some reason Laura felt her cheeks sting red.

"Not quite," he said. He started to head in the direction of the house, keeping low as if avoiding enemy fire. "Come and see."

Laura looked at the house again, picturing the darkness that would await them inside. She looked at Cethan's broad back and muscular shoulders. Champion of the boxing club. Fastest runner in school. She bent and picked an apple-sized rock up from the forest floor, then slipped it into her hoodie pocket. *Just in case*, she told herself, then she walked fully upright after Cethan as he made his way to the house's front door.

A rectangle of chipboard lay in two parts on the grass, rusted nails sticking up like rotting teeth around its edges. The door itself must once have been blue, but now most of the paint had flaked away and the wood itself had mouldered to black. Woodlice and millipedes crept across the scarred surface, revelling in the rot.

With a final glance around, Cethan turned the blackened brass handle and the door shunted awkwardly inwards, the bottom dragging on the bare wooden floor beyond. A stench of mildew and mould and worse rolled out. Laura pulled the neck of her hoodie up over her nose and mouth and tried not to gag.

“Sorry, I should have warned you,” Cethan said. “Stinks a bit.”

Laura could only nod. She swallowed down a mouthful of saliva and blinked away a film of tears. Cethan flashed her an apologetic smile, then stepped into the gloom. Laura’s hand clamped onto his arm.

“You’re not going in, are you?”

Cethan nodded. “That’s the whole point. I want to show you something.”

“What?”

“It’s a surprise. Trust me.”

Laura’s fingers brushed against the rock in her pocket. She looked past Cethan and into the darkened room beyond. “Leave the door open,” she said. “Wide.”

“Well, obviously,” Cethan said. “But hey listen,” he said, with that absolute sincerity of his, “if you’re scared we’ll leave it. It’s not a problem.”

Laura released her grip. She nudged Cethan to one side, then stepped past him into the house. The stink was suddenly all around her, cloying and sickly and warm in her throat. The hoodie did nothing to block it, but she kept it in place anyway.

The interior walls of the house had either never been built, or were long since gone. The whole inside was just one long, narrow room with some exposed plumbing at one end and what might once have been a single mattress festering at the other.

Light spilled in through the open door and around the edges of the window frames where the boards had warped and pulled loose. There were no windows on the back wall, just a long shelf running along it at about waist height. And on the shelf sat...

Sat...

Laura stared. Her eyes went along the shelf slowly. Cethan’s voice came from somewhere behind her, little more than a low whisper.

“Pretty freaky, huh?”

A number of plinths stood at regular intervals along the shelf, each with a hand-written label stuck to the front. Cethan steered her over to the first plinth. A mouse lay on its side on top of it. Or an ex-mouse, at least. Its tiny bones were laid out in a perfect mouse shape,

held together with thin grey wire. She could count every rib, every vertebrae of its long tail which curved beneath it like a question mark.

“That’s a mouse,” Cethan said. He pointed to the label on the front. “They left that, in case you couldn’t guess.”

“Who did?”

Cethan just shrugged and steered her to the right, where the next plinth was waiting. At first she thought the skeleton perched there was some sort of small monkey, until she spotted the word ‘squirrel’ scrawled on the card. The thing’s dead eye socket gazed at her accusingly. She blinked and looked away.

“What the Hell is this?”

“Mental, isn’t it? I found it last night when I was up here on my bike. Nearly died when I looked inside. Don’t think I’ve ever pedalled away from anywhere so fast in my life.”

“So you decide to bring me up? Great, thanks.”

“OK, maybe not the best first date, but hey, safety in numbers,” he smirked.

*Date.* He’d said *date*.

“Now check this out, it gets weirder.”

“It’s quite weird enough, thanks,” Laura said, but she didn’t resist as he guided her to plinth number three.

There was a mole’s skeleton on that one. She could’ve probably hazarded a good guess as to what kind of animal the wired-up bones had belonged to, but whoever had put them there had helpfully carved the word ‘mole’ directly into the wooden plinth itself.

Laura shuffled back. “I think I’d like to go now.”

“What? But there’s loads left.” Cethan gestured excitedly to the darkest corner of the house, up near the rotting mattress. “There’s a badger one up there, it’s huge.”

“Great. Well done. Good for it. Not really my cup of tea, though.”

Cethan blocked her path. “Wait, you can’t go yet. Don’t you think this is incredible? You can’t just go.” He smiled. “Come on, what would Batman do?”

Laura looked around at the skeletal remains. She shivered. “Leg it, probably.”

She took another step towards the door. Cethan took a step back, not stopping her, but not making it easy for her to leave, either. “Just a couple more minutes,” he implored. “I just want to—”

His heel snagged on something that was fixed to the floor. His arms flailed and his mouth formed a little circle of surprise. He landed on the bare boards with a hollow *thud*.

They both looked at the thing he had tripped over. It was a metal ring attached to a hatch in the floor by four rusty screws. Cethan’s jaw dropped. “That’s... Is that...? That’s a trapdoor.”

He leapt to his feet before Laura could move. Both hands wrapped around the iron ring. With a grunt of effort he pulled the hatch open and another wave of stink rolled up out of the void.

“Oh my God!” he said, his voice a half-whisper. The dim light picked out a few steep steps leading down from the hatch. “This is nuts.”

“No,” said Laura, shaking her head. “No way, before you even say it.”

“Just for a minute,” Cethan urged. “Just a quick look.”

“Forget it. Down there? Are you nuts? Forget it.”

“Come on,” he insisted. He caught her by the wrist. His hand was like a vice gripping her by the arm. She tried to pull back, but that only made his fingers tighten further. “Just a quick look,” he said again, and before she could resist, he dragged her down the steps and into the waiting darkness of the basement.

## Four.

Something was moving there, down in the dark. A scurrying and scrabbling of paws somewhere near floor level. Mice, she told herself, then she wondered if anyone had broken the news to them about the one upstairs.

The smell was overwhelming. It reeked of damp and of rot and of things long dead. It reminded her of the council tip on a hot day, and hung so thick in the air she wasn't sure if she were smelling it or tasting it.

The light trickling from the room above barely reached the fourth step down. She could make out the vague shape of Cethan, but beyond him there was nothing but the stinking dark. Her hand gripped the rock in her pocket. Her throat tightened and she took a moment to steady her voice.

"Right, very funny, let's go."

A weak orange light cast shadows across Cethan's face from below. "Boo!" he said, then he swung the beam of the torch towards her. The light hurt her eyes. Cethan released his grip and she turned away.

"Dick," she snapped and the beam swung away.

"Sorry," he said. "I thought that'd be funny."

"Not even close," she bit back. "Where'd you get the torch from?"

Cethan hesitated. "What? I just found it. There's a table or something here. It was sitting on top of that."

Laura felt her heart skip a beat again, although for different reasons this time. "That was lucky."

"Yes. I suppose it was."

Silence followed. The torch flickered, sending shadows scampering across the ceiling. Laura turned to look at the circle of shaky light on the wall. She stared at what was revealed in the torch's glow. For a long time she just stared, frozen to the spot, unable to speak.

Cethan asked the question that she wasn't quite able to form.

“What is *that*?”

Polaroid photographs covered a wide expanse of the nearest wall, a coloured pin pushed through each one and into the crumbling plaster below. There was a cat in the uppermost picture, its eyes burning demonically red in the glare of the camera’s flash. The cat lay on its side on a wooden plinth, a length of wire looped over its neck, holding its head in place. The photo next to it showed the cat from another angle, revealing another twist of wire across its back and belly.

The next few photos were much the same. Five photos in, though, the cat was looking considerably thinner.

By the eighth, it was almost certainly dead.

By the tenth, there was no doubt about it.

“What the hell?” Laura said, and this time there was no disguising the shake in her voice.

The cat’s steady decline continued all down the wall. Fur fell out. Flesh sunk in and drew back over blood-slicked bone. Eventually, all that was left were the bones themselves, and the wires pinning them in place.

“Cethan, *what the hell is this?*”

The light trembled in Cethan’s hand. “I’m not... I don’t...”

“This is messed up, this is too messed up,” Laura babbled, her voice becoming louder with every word. She made for the stairs.

“Laura, wait.”

Against all reason, something in his voice made her stop at the bottom step.

The beam of the torch was pointing at yet another wooden plinth. This one sat on the floor. It was larger than those upstairs, but she recognised the skeleton wired to the top of it immediately, even without the letters *C-A-T* spelling it out for her on the rectangle of card affixed to the base.

Laura stared down at the remains. Her stomach tightened, threatening to eject a school lunch that had tasted bad enough on the way down. The smell had been making her



light-headed since stepping into the place, but now the room was spinning, and fresh air seemed an impossibly long way away.

Somewhere in the darkness beyond what was left of the cat, something moved. It was the same scrabbling sound she'd heard earlier, but now she realised it wasn't mice. It couldn't be mice. It sounded too big for that.

Slowly. Slowly. Ever so slowly, Cethan inched the torch's shivering beam in the direction of the noise. It crept like a spider across the floor, inch by inch. The beam stopped when it found the source of the sound, then Cethan quickly whipped it away. There came a whimper, barely audible in the dark.

Clenching his jaw, hands shaking, Cethan steered the beam back to the next plinth, and to the dog that lay there on top of it.

It wasn't much bigger than the cat, although it may have been to begin with. Its ribcage was visible through its sunken fur. Flies swarmed over it, burrowing into the gaps in its torn flesh. Its tongue lolled out and its eyes were dull, but as the light fell on it again its head raised a fraction off the plinth. A loop of wire prevented it moving any higher, and all the animal could do was sink back down onto the wood.

"Oh Jesus," Cethan hissed. He swung the torch beam wildly around the basement, the light glinting off half a dozen more sets of eyes, moving too quickly to tell if they were living or dead. "Oh Jesus."

"Let's go. Come on, let's go," Laura yelled. "Let's go *now*."

The circle of light stopped swinging and came to rest on one final plinth. It was larger than the others, a two-metre square platform of dark wood. There was nothing on top of it, just a number of small round holes drilled through the polished surface.

"No! What are you doing? We need to get out of here," Laura shrieked. "Don't go any further!"

Cethan took a shaky step towards the plinth. A rectangle of white card was attached to the front. It, too, was bigger than the others. It needed to be. The others had all held just one word. This one had two:

Human being.

A gasp snagged in Cethan's throat, just as something hard and apple-sized hit the back of his head with a *crack*. He fell forwards, the torch slipping from his fingers. It thudded against the floor and the basement was swallowed by the dark.

He pressed his hand against the back of his head and felt blood pump through his fingers. "L-Laura...?" he stammered. There was a rustle in the shadows. The rock caught him just below the right temple. He spun left, stumbled, his hands landing in the mushy remains of something that still clung impossibly to life.

A scream burst on his lips. Another blow caught him just above the eyebrow. He threw up, the vomit ejecting from his throat and down his nose in a choking spray. The ground raced up to meet him, and as his head hit the floor he slipped from one shade of darkness into another.

A burst of white light woke him up. Well, that and the pain. His left eye was sealed shut with dried blood, the eyelashes fused and tangled together. He lay on his side, one arm trapped painfully beneath him, the other pinned in place. The room was dark again. He tried to raise his head, but a length of cold metal wire tightened across his neck.

Another flash. For a split-second Cethan saw the other plinths around him. Dogs and cats. A sheep, even, its doleful eyes gazing emptily back into his.

There was an electric *whirr* as the camera spat out the photograph. In the dark, he heard the scuffing of Doc Martins on the rough stone floor. Laura appeared by the stairs, the weak light casting a halo around her hooded head.

"I told you not to go any further," she said. She smiled shyly, and allowed herself a little farewell wave. "I'll see you next week, OK?"

Laura popped her earphones in and *Call Me* by *Blondie* filled the whole world, blocking out the sound of Cethan's screams. Mostly, at least.

With one final glance back, she climbed the steps and closed the hatch. Then she crossed to the door, out of the house, and skipped off into the start of the summer.

## Thanks from the author

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