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Opening extract from  
**Splintered**

Written by  
**A.G. Howard**

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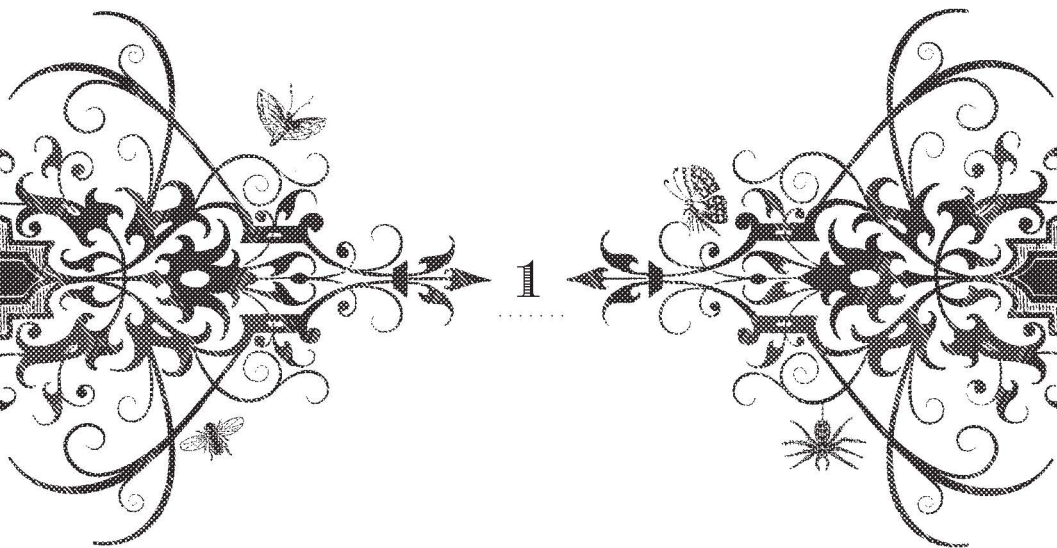
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## ONE-WAY TICKET TO UNDERLAND

I've been collecting bugs since I was ten; it's the only way I can stop their whispers. Sticking a pin through the gut of an insect shuts it up pretty quick.

Some of my victims line the walls in shadow boxes, while others get sorted into mason jars and placed on a bookshelf for later use. Crickets, beetles, spiders . . . bees and butterflies. I'm not picky. Once they get chatty, they're fair game.

They're easy enough to capture. All you need is a sealed plastic bucket filled with Kitty Litter and a few banana peels sprinkled in. Drill a hole in the lid, slide in a PVC pipe, and you have a bug snare. The fruit peels attract them, the lid traps them, and the ammonia

from the litter smotherers and preserves them.

The bugs don't die in vain. I use them in my art, arranging their corpses into outlines and shapes. Dried flowers, leaves, and glass pieces add color and texture to the patterns formed on plaster backgrounds. These are my masterpieces . . . my morbid mosaics.

School let out at noon today for the upperclassmen. I've been passing the last hour working on my newest project. A jar of spiders sits among the art tools cluttering my desk.

The sweet scent of goldenrod breezes through my bedroom window. There's a field of herbs next door to my duplex, attracting a genus of crab spider that changes color—like eight-legged chameleons—in order to move undetected among the yellow or white blooms.

Twisting off the jar's lid, I dip out thirty-five of the small white arachnids with long tweezers, careful not to squish their abdomens or break their legs. With tiny straight pins, I secure them onto a black-tinted plaster background already covered with beetles selected for their iridescent night-sky sheen. What I'm envisioning isn't a typical spatter of stars; it's a constellation that coils like feathery bolts of lightning. I have hundreds of warped scenes like this filling my head and no idea where they came from. My mosaics are the only way to get them out.

Leaning back in my chair, I study the piece. Once the plaster dries, the insects will be permanently in place, so if any adjustments need to be made, it has to be done quickly.

Glancing at the digital clock beside my bed, I tap my bottom lip. I have less than two hours before I have to meet Dad at the asylum. It's been a Friday tradition ever since kindergarten, to get chocolate-cheesecake ice cream at the Scoopin' Stop and take it to

share with Alison.

Brain freeze and a frozen heart are not my idea of fun, but Dad insists it's therapy for all of us. Maybe he thinks by seeing my mom, by sitting where I might one day live, I'll somehow beat the odds.

Too bad he's wrong.

At least one good thing has come out of my inherited insanity. Without the delusions, I might never have found my artistic medium.



My obsession with bugs started on a Friday in fifth grade. It had been a rough one. Taelor Tremont told everyone that I was related to Alice Liddell, the girl who inspired Lewis Carroll's novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Since Alice was, in fact, my great-great-great-grandmother, my classmates teased me during recess about dormice and tea parties. I thought things couldn't get much worse until I felt something on my jeans and realized, mortified, that I got my period for the first time and was totally unprepared. On the verge of tears, I lifted a sweater from the lost-and-found pile just inside the main entrance and wrapped it around my waist for the short walk to the office. I kept my head down, unable to meet anyone's gaze.

I pretended to be sick and called my dad to pick me up. While I waited for him in the nurse's office, I imagined a heated argument between the vase of flowers on her desk and the bumblebee buzzing around them. It was one powerful delusion, because I really *heard* it, as sure as I could hear the passing of students from one class to the next on the other side of the closed door.

Alison had warned me of the day I would "become a woman." Of the voices that would follow. I'd just assumed it was her mental



instability making her say that . . .

The whispers were impossible to ignore, just like the sobs building in my throat. I did the only thing I could: I denied what was happening inside me. Rolling a poster of the four basic food groups into a cylinder, I tapped the bee hard enough to stun it. Then I whisked the flowers out of the water and pressed them between the pages of a spiral notebook, effectively silenced their chattering petals.

When we got home, poor, oblivious Dad offered to make some chicken soup. I shrugged him off and went to my room.

“Do you think you’ll feel well enough to visit Mom later tonight?” he asked from the hallway, always reluctant to upset Alison’s delicate sense of routine.

I shut my door without answering. My hands shook and my blood felt jittery in my veins. There had to be an explanation for what had happened in the nurse’s office. I was stressed about the Wonderland jokes, and when my hormones kicked in, I’d had a panic attack. Yeah. That made sense.

But I knew deep down I was lying to myself, and the last place I wanted to visit was an asylum. A few minutes later, I went back to the living room.

Dad sat in his favorite recliner—a worn-out corduroy lump covered with daisy appliqué. In one of her “spells,” Alison had sewn the cloth flowers all over it. Now he would never part with the chair.

“You feeling better, Butterfly?” he asked, looking up from his fishing magazine.

Musty dampness blasted into my face from the air conditioner as I leaned against the closest wood-paneled wall. Our two-bedroom duplex had never offered much in the way of privacy, and on that day

it felt smaller than ever before. The waves of his dark hair moved in the rattling gusts.

I shuffled my feet. This was the part of being an only child I hated—having no one but Dad to confide in. “I need some more stuff. They only gave us one sample.”

His eyes were blank, like those of a deer staring down traffic during morning rush hour.

“The special talk they give at school,” I said, my stomach in knots. “The one where boys aren’t invited?” I flashed the purple pamphlet they’d handed out to all the girls in third grade. It was creased because I’d shoved it and the sample sanitary pad into a drawer beneath my socks.

After an uncomfortable pause, Dad’s face flushed red. “Oh. So that’s why . . .” He suddenly became preoccupied with a colorful array of saltwater lures. He was embarrassed or worried or both, because there wasn’t any salt water within a five-hundred-mile radius of Pleasance, Texas.

“You know what this means, right?” I pressed. “Alison is going to give me the puberty speech again.”

The blush spread from his face to his ears. He flipped a couple of pages, staring blankly at the pictures. “Well, who better to tell you about the birds and the bees than your mom. Right?”

An unspoken answer echoed inside my head: *Who better but the bees themselves?*

I cleared my throat. “Not that speech, Dad. The nutso one. The ‘It can’t be stopped. You can’t escape the voices any more than I could. Great-great-gran never should’ve gone down the rabbit hole’ speech.”

It didn’t matter that Alison might be right about the voices after

all. I wasn't ready to admit that to Dad or myself.

He sat rigid, as if the air conditioner had iced his spine.

I studied the crisscross scars on my palms. He and I both knew it was less what Alison was going to say than what she might do. If she had another meltdown, they'd slap her into the straitjacket.

I learned early on why it's spelled *strait*. That particular spelling means *tight*. Tight enough that blood pools in the elbows and the hands become numb. Tight enough that there's no escape, no matter how loud the patient screams. Tight enough that it suffocates the hearts of the wearer's loved ones.

My eyes felt swollen, like they might burst another leak. "Look, Dad, I've already had a really sucky day. Can we please just not go tonight? Just this once?"

Dad sighed. "I'll call Soul's Asylum and let them know we'll visit Mom tomorrow instead. But you'll need to tell her eventually. It's important to her, you know? To stay involved in your life."

I nodded. I might have to tell her about becoming a woman, but I didn't have to tell her about becoming *her*.

Hooking a finger in the fuchsia scarf tied around my jean shorts, I glanced at my feet. Shiny pink toenails reflected the afternoon light where it streamed from the window. Pink had always been Alison's favorite color. That's why I wore it.

"Dad," I mumbled loud enough for him to hear. "What if Alison's right? I've noticed some things today. Things that just aren't . . . normal. *Im* not normal."

"Normal." His lips turned up in an Elvis curl. He once told me his smirk won Alison over. I think it was his gentleness and sense of humor, because those two things kept me from crying every night after she was first committed.