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Everyday Magic

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**ABSTRACT**

This is a collection of short stories about magic. Through four different lives—an aspiring artist, a college student on the verge of a decision, a dealer of unusual drugs, and a girl about to lose her best friend—they explore themes of memory, self-expression, and hope.

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## Introduction

### A Fantasist's Manifesto

“Six hundred professional dreamers would have been needed, to reveal the nature of things beneath the roots of trees, and in the deepest mountain caverns, and in the depths of the sea, for the map, to be worth anything, needed to contain both the visible empire and the invisible.”

-- Neil Gaiman, “The Mapmaker”

*A girl met a witch at the well. The girl carried a pail in each hand, and, seeing a tired old woman, she offered the witch a drink of water.*

*Pleased, the witch accepted. The girl came forward with the pails and lowered each into the well in turn, drawing them up full of water. She turned to offer one to the witch, but the witch forestalled her.*

*“What do you wish for,” the witch inquired, “in the evening, when you kneel and say your prayers?”*

*“I pray I will be upright and virtuous,” the girl said primly.*

*The witch accepted the pail and set it on the rim of the well.*

*“And what do you wish for,” she said to the girl, “at night, in your private dreams?”*

*The girl said, blushing, “I dream I am admired.”*

*The witch held out her hand for the other bucket and placed it beside the first.*

*“There,” she said. “Now, girl, I am thirsty. Give me a drink from the first pail, and you will be pious. Give me the second, and you will become beautiful. Which will you choose?”*

*The girl hesitated, struggling with herself, but she was devout. “I choose piety,” she said, and bowed her head.*

*The witch seized the first pail and drank deeply. The girl smiled, but the witch laughed and struck the second pail with the back of her hand. It toppled into the well. The water inside it splashed out, shimmering, as beautiful as the girl would never be. She leaped forward to catch it, but it slipped into the well and was lost.*

Afterwards, the girl returns to the well every evening and night. She thinks about what might have happened if she had chosen differently; she imagines it so often that she can see it in her mind’s eye—the way that she, newly lovely, smiled so sweetly that the witch smiled in spite of herself. She knows the witch would have blessed her then, instead of laughing that terrible mocking laugh. Sometimes the girl is sure the witch will come back, and she plans for that day, thinking carefully about what each of them would say and do.

*The girl was older now, plain and severe, her forehead creased with earnest lines. She has only one pail to carry to the well, and it slips from her fingers when she sees the witch there waiting for her.*

*“A drink,” the witch croaked. “A toast.” She was holding two clay cups, one in each hand. “Shall we drink your contentment? Or do you wish things had been otherwise?” As she spoke, she raised each cup in turn: first the right, then the left.*

*“I am wiser now,” said the girl. “I choose beauty.” She filled the cup in the witch’s left hand. The witch drank. When she dashed the other, empty, cup to the ground, the girl heard it shatter and closed her eyes in relief.*

The girl conjures the moment so vividly, she can’t understand why it doesn’t become fact. But the chance is gone, and longing cannot call it back.

There is an aching gap between possibility and reality. Every small decision precludes a thousand alternatives, and although the field of opportunity is never less than infinite, those might-have-beens are always tantalizing because they could have happened – they almost *did* happen – except that choice or coincidence put them out of reach. Time is a single thread, and missed chances are inaccessible even to regret.

And if the witch did come back—if the girl’s daydream is part of the story—still, the girl is not content. Pious, she curses her rigidity. Beautiful, she regrets her shallowness. No matter what she is, the alternative haunts her. She will always remember her choice with a trace of wistfulness. Time might make it seem more distant, less significant, but she is doomed either to let that moment define her, or to forget.

A tragic choice. Maybe things don’t have to end that way.

*The girl hesitated, struggling with herself, but she was devout. “I choose piety,” she said. She bowed her head as the witch drank, but when the witch moved to strike the second pail into the well, the girl snatched it away. She tipped it up and drank from it herself, water dripping down her chin, and marveled at the taste: pure and sweet, the answer to her wish.*

Now it's a different story entirely.

Of course, flesh-and-blood people cannot unmake and remake decisions this way. We can narrate our lives if we like, but we can't revise them. Still, in a very real sense, books allow us to escape the circumstances to which our choices have condemned us. When I read an absorbing book, it doesn't take me long to forget that I'm tired, that I have an appointment, that I've been sitting in the same uncomfortable position for hours. I forget I can move, I forget I can hear, I forget what time it is and where I'm sitting and who I am. The whole world narrows to the size of a page. It's not that books simulate reality; it's that, for a while, I believe that reality consists of printed text. Stories have the same emotional impact as lived experiences – desire, fear, grief, catharsis, we feel it all. How could a story ever make people cry if we didn't, on some level, believe it was real?

If you can suspend disbelief, if you can indulge your imagination, you can live a million lives without damaging your own. You can be all the things you never had a chance to become. Fiction is exempt from the normal rules of cause and effect: choices are not binding, facts are not necessary, anything that's plausible might as well be true. It's like having wings.

*A holy man meditated on a high stone hill, never speaking, hardly moving, fasting day and night. At first he listened to the crunch of animal footsteps on loose stones, the yelp of a distant coyote, the swift flutter of bats overhead. Then those noises grew distant and were replaced by the hiss of the wind. At last sounds faded from his attention entirely, and he noticed only his own breath and the wide sky overhead.*

*An angel touched down on the sand and folded his bright wings behind her back. "Your efforts deserve a reward," he said to the holy man. "What do you ask?"*

*“I am here for one purpose,” the holy man answered. “I am determined to earn the power of flight.”*

*The angel considered, then plucked one feather from his wing. The holy man moved to take it, but the angel held up a hand.*

*“Take it, and you will fly away from this place,” he said. “Refuse it, and you will leave on foot. But you must choose, for if you claim this feather you will never touch the earth again.”*

And while we’re filling in history’s unfinished sentences – it isn’t such a long leap from fiction to fantasy. A reader of fiction is willing to believe, albeit in a temporary, limited way, that the made-up events the author describes really did take place. Once you accept the reality of things that didn’t ever happen, it’s easy to believe in things that *couldn’t* ever happen – prophecies, time travel, superpowers, immortality, things that contradict the physical laws of the universe.

What if people could fly? What if a holy man could, with enough faith and concentration, simply take wing? It isn’t such an outrageous idea, in a story. In fact, though, the holy man is not really necessary. Nor is the desert. I can remove them both, if you like.

*A hunter moved through the woods, feet silent, arrow nocked. Something rustled in the leaves high above and to his left. Instantly he swiveled and fired, and a winged shape fell to earth.*

*The hunter crept closer and saw a bird, still alive, grazed by the arrow but otherwise unhurt. He reached down to twist its neck.*



*“Stop!” cried the bird, a sound full of anguish. “Spare me, and I will give you a gift. I will give you the power of flight.”*

*The hunter hesitated.*

*“Take this feather,” said the bird. With its beak, it tugged a bright blue feather from its wing.*

*The hunter stretched out a hand, but the bird warned, “Take care! Claim it, and you will fly away from this place. But you will never touch the earth again.”*

*The bird let the feather fall from its beak, and in a flash of blue wings, it was gone.*

You can tell and retell the story with a hunter, an angel, a bird, a well, a witch, without altering it in any essential way. The elements are interchangeable, but the tale, the thing that holds them in relationship to one another, does not vary. By forcing it into various disguises, we discover which parts of it are permanent and which are circumstantial. Each variation on the theme brings us closer to the central narrative: a quester, a wonder-worker, a choice.

But I am reluctant to reduce a story to its component parts, because to do so is to strip it of its vital force. Dissected and laid out in cold bright light, narrative is an object of fascination but not of love. A story needs specificity—particulars are what make it feel lived, not told. Was the girl shallow? Was the witch cruel? Did the holy man deserve his reward? And what did they choose? Perhaps that is what matters most of all.

Tread carefully here, because in this realm fantasy is just a breath away from myth. The real heart of a story, the thing that imbues character and symbol with narrative force, is something almost mystical. It takes individuals’ experiences for raw material and distills truths

about the whole of human nature. And remember that in the moment of reading, all this ceases to be hypothetical and becomes implicitly true.

Deliberately or not, fantasy probes the whys and origins of things. It is the original search for meaning, circling closer and closer to a more perfect vision, a more complete revelation, a wider view of the sweep of the universe.

Alfred Lord, writing in *The Singer of Tales* about the bards of Yugoslavia, put it this way:

The traditional oral epic singer is not an artist; he is a seer. The patterns of thought that he has inherited came into being to serve not *art* but religion in its most basic sense . . . Art appropriated the forms of oral narrative. But it is from the dynamic, life principle in myth, the wonder-working tale, that art derived its force. (220-221)

Fiction and faith have tangled roots. It is the prerogative of fantasy to find the places they connect, where fiction transcends art and opens a window on eternity.

*There is a dragon curled around the rim of the world, muzzle resting on the tip of his tail. His body lies along the horizon, at the cusp of heaven and earth, and he is always watching, vigilant for those who might try to steal the pieces of sky that break off against the hard ground. This sky-stuff is soft and infinitely blue.*

*The dragon's left eye is silver, and it sees clearly in the moonlight; his right eye is gold, and it is sharp in the brightest sun. He is ever vigilant. But once, or maybe many times, a thief*

*crept upon him at twilight, when both eyes were blind. She carried away a piece of the sky. What she did with it, no one knows.*

## **Chapter 1**

### **Thread Peddler**

The gravel lane cut a straight line between two soybean fields, flat beneath the streaked gray sky. Dry stalks rustled in a wind too slight to feel. Along the lane a two-wheeled cart was moving, jouncing over potholes and raising a blue cloud of dust. Its canvas cover was lashed to a frame made of rust-spotted iron, like an antique plow left out in the weather. A figure in a shapeless hat and cloak sat on the front of the cart, her hands poised as if holding a set of reins. In front of her, where a horse should have been hitched, the wagon tongue jutted forward into empty air.

There was a flutter of color at the back of the cart. A row of threads like the fringe of a shawl dangled from under the tarpaulin and flapped against the bumper. One strand of salmon pink and another of blaze orange stood out like flares amid milder colors bleached gray in the sunlight.

The gravel lane ended where it met Route 50. The cart halted at the edge of the asphalt, balancing improbably on its single pair of wheels. A yellow school bus swept past, making the dangling threads flutter in an updraft. The cart pulled onto the highway and followed the bus, the right wheel on the shoulder, the left wheel in the driving lane.

“What was that?” said Livvy Keene. “Is somebody riding a wheelbarrow?”

She poked Joey, who was sitting in the aisle seat. “What?” he said.

“There. We just passed it.” Livvy raised herself out of the seat, following the cart’s progress across the bus windows. “I swear, it’s slower than a tractor.”

Joey craned his neck and caught a glimpse of stained canvas and wheels with exposed spokes. “Weird,” he said. “It’s like a buggy.”

“Only no horse,” Livvy said. “How does it even move?”

Hall rolled his eyes. He was sitting in front of them, one long arm thrown across the seat back. “It has a motor,” he said.

“It does not,” Livvy said. She propped her knee on the seat and stood up taller. “Look at it. It’s got to be a hundred years old.”

“Plenty of time to put an engine on it,” said Hall.

“You can’t just stick a motor on any old wagon,” Livvy said. “You have to have gears and a gas ta – ”

“Siddown back there!” the bus driver bellowed.

“Ooo,” said Hall.

Livvy flushed and lowered her bottom onto the seat. “It *looks* like it’s supposed to be pulled by a horse,” she told Hall. “Like Marv Thompson’s hay wagon.”

“That’s not Marv,” Hall said. “Unless he was wearing a dress. Anyway, where’s the horse?”

“I didn’t say it *was* Marv,” Livvy retorted. “I bet it’s a hobo,” she said, lowering her voice and looking at Joey. “Maybe she’s too poor to buy a car.”

“Maybe she’s a lost cowboy,” Hall said seriously. “Maybe she’s an outer space alien.”

Livvy threw him a venomous look.

“We did see a hobo on the train at the grain elevator,” Joey said.

“See?” Livvy looked pointedly at Hall.

Unconcerned, Hall tipped his baseball cap farther back on his head. “Guess that lady’s moving with her superpowers then.”

“It probably does have a motor,” Joey said, watching the cart fall behind in the bus’s rear window. “I don’t see pedals or anything.”

“Oh, fine,” Livvy said. “Hey, do you have anything to trade? I got four root beers at lunch.” She opened the top of her backpack and offered Joey a fistful of bottle caps. “I’ll swap you for a ginger ale.”

“Oh.” Joey put a hand absently in his jeans pocket. “I think I left mine in my locker.”

“Aw, you forgot again?” Livvy let her hand fall into her lap. “What did you have?”

“Mine from my root beer at lunch and one other one,” Joey said. “Maybe a limeade. I don’t remember.”

“A limeade’s not bad,” said Livvy. “I’d give you two root beers for it. Well, three. I’ll throw in an extra ’cause this one’s bent.”

“I’ll bring it tomorrow,” Joey said. “We can trade at recess.”

“There’s going to be a baseball tournament at recess,” Hall said.

“There is?” Joey turned to face him.

“Oh, baseball,” Livvy grumbled. She smacked her back against the seat and looked out the window.

“Next week,” Hall said. “Tim and me are making a team if you want to be on it. Tim’s on the junior team, so he’s going to get us some more players from there.”

“What about the senior team?” Joey said.

“Nah, they’re all older kids and they aren’t in our class. Do you have a glove?”

Joey shook his head. “My brother’s got one, but he gets annoyed when I borrow it.” A line of trees whipped past the window, a windbreak between two stubbled cornfields. The topmost branches scissored apart and together as yellow leaves spun away into a rush of wind.

“You should get one,” Hall told him. “The school doesn’t have enough for everyone.”

“I know, but they cost two dollars,” Joey said. “I went and looked when I was in town with my ma. I’ve only got fifty cents.”

“When’s your allowance?”

“Two weeks.”

Livvy stuffed her bottle caps back into her backpack and slumped down, propping her knees against the back of Hall’s seat. The bus accelerated around a curve, swaying her against the window.

“Hold on,” Hall said suddenly, “my dad still has his old glove.”

“Really?” Joey straightened up. “Could I use it?”

“Probably,” Hall said. “You should come over and try it on. It’s a little beat up, but it might work.”

“Sure!” The bus was approaching their stop. Joey stuck his knee into the aisle and bounced it up and down. “I can come over today if you want. No homework.”

The bus juddered over a railroad crossing and came to a stop at the T-junction where Windrow Lane met the highway. A grain elevator, built like two wood-frame houses stacked on top of each other, cast its shadow over a threesome of leafless buckeye trees.

The bus doors opened with a hydraulic gasp and Joey and Hall stood up and made their way down the aisle, still talking. Livvy snatched up her backpack to follow them, but two girls from the back seats pushed past her, giggling at something one of them had just said. Livvy's shoulders fell in an inaudible sigh and she shuffled along behind them, swinging her backpack by its straps.

Joey was waiting for her when she hopped down to the blacktop. "Look!" he said. "This was lying on the road."

It was a bottle cap, printed with the words COBBLE'S GINGER FIZZ.

"Oh, *lucky*," said Livvy enviously. "A ginger ale. You found it right here?"

"Yeah," Joey said. The school bus started with a lurch and pulled away, kicking up an eddy of leaves behind its exhaust pipe. Hall stood waiting on the other side of the street, prodding a smear of tar with the tip of his shoe.

"That's really lucky," Livvy said again. "I wonder who left it there."

"Do you want it?" Joey asked.

"For sure! How much?" Livvy said. "I can go get my collection. I've got root beer and fruit punch and lots of other stuff."

"That's okay," Joey said. "You can keep it." He held it out.

Livvy took it hesitantly, feeling somehow let down. "You don't want to trade?"

"Nah." Joey glanced at Hall. "Listen, I've got to go. I'll see you later."

"Well, thanks," Livvy said, looking down at the ginger ale cap.

“Welcome,” Joey said. He hitched up his backpack straps and jogged across the street.

“You sure?” Livvy hollered after him as he joined Hall on the corner. He flashed a thumbs-up over his shoulder, and then he and Hall turned onto Windrow Lane, walking on the cracked asphalt shoulder. Ahead of them the road undulated past white farmhouses that grew smaller with distance. The two girls from the bus turned into their driveway, their brightly colored backpacks standing out amid the corn stubble.

A gust blew in off the soybean fields, making the buckeyes’ branches sway. Livvy shivered. She dropped the ginger ale cap into her sweater pocket and hurried across the highway with her arms crossed tightly over her chest. She didn’t notice the two-wheeled cart, with its cloaked and hatted driver, as it rolled off the edge of the asphalt behind her and came to rest under the buckeye trees.

The house on the corner had a sign stenciled in black above the bow window: KEENE’S GROUNDS & BEANS, it read. A chip of paint shaped like a baseball cap was missing from the storm door. Livvy cut across the lawn and went in.

The strip of burlap stuffed in the crack under the front door swished across the floorboards as Livvy shut the door behind her. The air inside was warm and noisy. Livvy leaned on the lowest hook of the coat tree and pulled off her shoes, a wool jacket scratching against her cheek.

“And here’s Livvy!” her father cried. George Keene was sitting on a stool by the woodstove with his legs bracing him on either side. “Did the school survive another day of you?”

The regulars, in their plaid flannels and boots, were clustered at the table by the window. Arthur Benson gave Livvy a nod.

“No homework today,” she announced, dropping her backpack next to her shoes.



“No homework at all?” asked her mother. She was behind the counter at the coffee machine.

“Well, some. But I finished it in school.”

Clara Keene came around the counter, carrying a pot of coffee. “Don’t leave your bag in the doorway, Livvy.”

She brought the coffee to the window table, where Marv Thompson was talking, his feet up on a chair. His lips smacked together as he spoke. Marv had no teeth left, but he refused to wear dentures.

“Five thousand dollars in debt for one piece of machinery! Two hundred cash if you want to rent the thing for a year. You’re just not going to break even. Thanks, Clara, I’ll take s’more coffee.”

Livvy’s mother refilled his cup from the pot. Livvy crossed the room, lugging her backpack by one strap. She sat on the brick apron of the woodstove and lined up her toes on the crack between two floorboards.

Her father tugged her ponytail. “What brings you inside so early? Too cold?”

“They’re playing *baseball*,” Livvy filled the word with disdain.

“Not your game?” Arthur asked her, swinging one leg. He was perched on the end of the magazine rack.

“No,” Livvy said. “It’s boring. Can I have my jar?” she asked her father.

George reached behind him and took a glass jam jar off the top of the woodstove. It was half filled with bottle caps. “There y’are,” he said.

“Anyone else for coffee?” Clara asked the room. There was a chorus of affirmatives and she leaned across the table, filling mugs.

Livvy took her fistful of root beer caps out of her backpack and spilled them into the top of the jar.

“Get a good price for those?” George asked.

“No.” Livvy screwed the cap onto the jar with three ferocious jerks.

“Better luck next time,” George said cheerfully.

“I will *not* have better luck,” Livvy said. She banged the jar down hard on the floor.

Clara turned around at the noise. “Livvy,” she said reprovingly. Livvy crossed her arms tightly, avoiding her mother’s gaze.

“You’ve swindled Joey a hundred times by now,” George said to Livvy. “You’ll come back tomorrow and drive a hard bargain.”

Livvy said nothing. She kicked at the trailing strap of her backpack.

“Look at all the caps you’ve collected.” George picked up the jar and turned it over, making the bottle tops clatter into the lid. “I bet you could buy Joey outright if you wanted to.”

“Joey doesn’t want to trade anymore,” Livvy said. “He never finds anything, or he forgets his bottle caps at school, and all he wants to do is talk to *Hall* about *baseball*. Which is a stupid game and Joey knows it.”

Livvy kicked her backpack again, spinning it in a circle on the floor. “Maybe you could play baseball with them,” George suggested.

“They don’t want me to,” Livvy said.

“Sure they do.”

“They don’t!” Livvy burst out. A few of the men at the window table glanced around. “And I don’t want to play baseball. It never used to be like this. Hall sat in the back of the bus and Joey and I traded bottle tops.”

George looked over her head at Clara, who said briskly, ““Used to’ won’t get you anywhere, Livvy.”

Clara glanced out the bow window and stopped herself mid-motion, the coffeepot suspended over a full cup.

“Something the matter?” said George.

“Take a look,” said Clara in a queer voice. “There’s somebody across the street.”

Livvy jumped up and crowded onto the window seat. The two-wheeled cart was parked under the hickory trees, tailgate in the dirt and tongue in the air.

“It’s that wagon!” Livvy cried. “I saw it on the bus.”

“Send the sugar over this way, would you, Livvy?” said Marv. Livvy spun around on the windowsill and passed him the ceramic sugar bowl from the table.

George came to stand next to Clara. “Have you seen that thing before?” he asked her. Clara shrugged.

“How did it get here?” George said. “Did some tractor drive off without its pull-behind?”

“It drives itself,” Livvy said.

“Drives *itself*?” George’s eyebrows rose. He watched as the driver, her face hidden under her hat, began untying the canvas. “I don’t see an engine. It looks familiar, though. Don’t know where I’ve seen it before.”

“Coffee, Arthur?” Clara said, resuming her round. Arthur, trying to see out the window over the others’ heads, gave up and looked at her. “No thank you, ma’am,” he said. “I’d take a root beer if you have one though.”

“I’ll check,” Clara told him. She went into the back room, leaving the coffee pot on the counter.

“Huh!” Marv had finally twisted himself around so he could see out the window. “That’s the thread peddler’s cart.”

“The what?” said Livvy.

“The thread peddler’s cart,” Marv repeated. He stirred his coffee. “You never heard of the thread peddler?”

“No,” Livvy said. “Who’s that?”

“She used to mend harness for my daddy,” Marv said. “Did such a good job, he had her come back every year. He said anything that she fixed stayed fixed.”

“Talking about ancient times, Marv?” George said. He took the screen off the woodstove and poked another log in.

“Yuh,” Marv grunted.

George hooked the screen back on. “Livvy, it’s your job to pinch him if he forgets and starts telling the same story over again.”

Marv grumbled into his coffee. “Happens to everybody when they hit sixty. Mice in the grain bin.”

“Did this woman sell thread?” said Arthur. Clara brought him his root beer and he popped the top on the edge of the magazine rack. “Yarn and kite string and such?”

“That was her regular business,” Marv said. “But with us she mended harness. Back then that wasn’t an elevator” – he gestured at the window and the looming silhouette of the grain elevator – “it was my daddy’s horse barn. I used to hide in with the plow horses and watch the thread peddler work. You never saw anybody stitch so fast.”

Clara bent over the woodbox, her long braid falling over one shoulder. “Out of logs?”

“Yes,” George told her in an undertone. “Used the last one just now. I’ll get some more.”

He pushed himself up from his stool and went out the side door to the porch.

“She had all kinds of thread on spools on her cart,” Marv went on. A leaf curlicued past the window above his head. “Purple and green and I don’t know what colors. There was a big reel of gold, too. That stuff, now – that stuff was just beautiful. Bright like corn coming out of the harvester. I stole a piece of it once when she wasn’t looking.”

Arthur choked on a gulp of root beer. “You *stole* it?” he sputtered.

“Sure did,” Marv said. “Cut off a piece with my jackknife.”

Arthur coughed into his elbow, eyes streaming. “You all right there?” said George, coming in through the side door. He dumped an armful of logs into the woodbox with a heavy clatter. Clara went out for a second load.

“Fine,” said Arthur in a ghost of a voice. He cleared his throat. “You can’t just—from the thread peddler—you can’t just take the gold!”

Livvy switched her attention to him. “Do you know her?”

“Unbelievable,” Arthur mumbled. He took a cautious sip of his root beer. “Yeah, I knew the thread peddler. She used to set up outside of school and sell string for a nickel a yard.”

“Hold on now,” George interrupted. “This can’t be the same person. If she was in business back when Marv was a kid, she was a sack of bones by the time Arthur got out of diapers.”

Arthur shrugged. “Well, it sounds like the same person. She didn’t look old, though.”

“She isn’t old,” Livvy confirmed, her nose against the window glass. “She moves too fast.”

The peddler had removed a long pole from the cart and was bent over, mounting it upright on the tailgate. She had taken off her hat. Underneath, her hair was braided in closely spaced rows.

“Maybe there’s more than one thread peddler,” said George. “A whole army of thread peddlers. Roaming the countryside in little wind-up carts.”

Marv snorted derisively. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. There was only ever one thread peddler.”

“All right,” George said agreeably. He stretched out an arm to open the door for Clara, who backed in with split logs piled on her forearms. “One immortal thread peddler, wandering the cornfields since Noah landed his ark.”

Marv put his coffee down, glaring, and jabbed a finger toward the cloaked figure under the buckeye trees. “That’s her, I’m telling you. Same lady I saw sixty years ago.”

“Go easy, Marv,” said Clara. She tumbled the logs into the woodbox.

“What about the gold thread?” Livvy piped. “Did you buy the gold?”

“I never did,” Arthur said. “I never had the guts. Once we dared Pete to go up and ask her about it, but she told him he didn’t have the price. He had more’n ten dollars pooled from all of us, so I don’t know how much it cost.” He used the magazine rack to pop the top of his root beer.

“Do you still have yours?” Livvy asked, turning to Marv. “Can I see it?”

Marv finished his coffee. “Don’t have it anymore,” he said. “It turned gray the day she left.”

“It did what?” Livvy said.

“The color bled right out of it,” Marv said. “Soon as the peddler was gone from the farm. I hadn’t been so sad about anything since my dog died.”

George snorted. “It didn’t turn gray, you old ham. You probably mixed it up with a gray thread by accident.”

“I never mixed it up with anything,” insisted Marv. “I never let that thread out of my sight. I kept it tied to the handle of my jackknife so I could look at it all the time. It was so bright, you know. You could hardly believe you were touching it when it was there in your hand.”

“I know what you mean,” Arthur said thoughtfully. “There was something special about that gold.”

Marv was quiet, staring out the window. The cart driver was hanging a square-sided lantern from a hook near the top of her pole. She put her hands inside her cloak and reached up with a lit match, one hand cupped to shield it from the wind. The lantern caught and made a yellow flicker amid the buckeye twigs.

“Can I have a quarter, daddy?” Livvy asked. “I’m going to buy some thread.”

“Sure.” George reached into his pocket and tossed a coin to her underhand just as Clara appeared with a fresh pot of coffee.

“Hold it,” Clara said and snatched the quarter mid-flight. “What happened to your allowance?” she said to Livvy.

“I spent it on root beer,” Livvy said. “Only the thread peddler might not come back! I have to—”

“Livvy,” Clara interrupted. “You know the rules.”

“This could be part of next week’s allowance!” Livvy argued. “You could give me twenty-five cents less then.”

“No,” Clara said firmly.

Livvy opened her mouth, looking mutinous, but then she caught Clara's eye and scowled. She jumped off the window seat and brushed past the table, making the spoons rattle inside the coffee mugs.

"Olivia," Clara said sharply. When Livvy showed no sign of hearing, Clara cut across the room and knelt in front of her, grasping her by both shoulders.

"Listen to me, Livvy," she said in a low voice. "You want that gold thread, don't you."

Something in her face made Livvy hold still.

"Suppose Marv is right," Clara said. "Suppose that peddler was here way back when Marv was a kid. Suppose she was here when Arthur was your age. Maybe she was here again when we opened up this shop. You were only just born."

"You saw the thread peddler?" Livvy whispered.

"Your daddy did too," said Clara. "Seems he doesn't remember, but he bought me the yarn for that sweater you're wearing."

"This one?" Livvy stretched the knit away from her stomach. "How come he doesn't remember?"

Clara shrugged. "It was just a little thing. People forget."

Livvy frowned, her lower lip jutting.

"If that peddler's as old as Marv says," Clara went on, "then she's been everywhere. She's seen everything. A million people have bought thread from her, but I'd bet not many of them ended up with the gold."

"Marv did," Livvy said.

"He didn't get to keep it, did he?" said Clara. "He didn't have the price."

"What's the price?"



Clara said, so quietly Livvy could hardly hear, “I’ll tell you what I paid for it.”

Livvy stared at her.

“I remember it was the first time we had a fire in the woodstove,” she said. “No customers yet, just you and your daddy and me, but I could smell the coffee brewing and I thought, if this could last forever—”

She drew breath, a small jagged sound. “I gave the peddler the first coals from that fire. I carried them out to her in a jam jar. She took them and used them to light her lantern, and in exchange, she gave me this.”

Clara reached up and adjusted the collar of Livvy’s sweater. A thread-thin gold circle gleamed on her third finger, just above her wedding ring.

She straightened up, knees cracking, and turned toward the window. “More coffee, anyone?” she called.

Livvy stood for a moment, frowning, then made her way to the door. “Hey, Livvy,” Arthur said as she was putting on her shoes. Livvy glanced up. “For your collection,” he said, and tossed her the top from his root beer bottle.

Livvy caught it one-handed and glanced at the label on the top. “Thanks,” she said. She jammed her heel into the back of her shoe and hurried outside. As she passed the dustbin by the door, she let Arthur’s bottle cap fall surreptitiously into the trash.

A small crowd had gathered across the street by the peddler’s cart. The two girls from the back of the bus dawdled under the trees. Joey and Hall were playing catch nearby. It was twilight now, and the ball was all but invisible until it thunked into their mitts. Livvy tried to catch Joey’s eye, but he didn’t see her.

The thread peddler's lantern was bright against the cloud-smudged sunset. As Livvy came closer, the peddler herself stepped into the light, and a murmur traveled through the group of gathered children. She had hung her cloak in the shadows at the front of the cart, and she swept into view wearing a shawl – a shawl the likes of which Livvy had never seen. It must have been made of silk, because no other fabric could suggest so many colors in the shimmers where the light caught it. There was blue in its folds, honey yellow on its pleats, glints and flecks of crimson in the loose threads on its edge. The colors rippled and flowed like a wheat field under a breeze. The thread peddler reached across the cart and threw back the canvas sheet with a flourish.

“Whoa,” Livvy breathed.

The cart was strung like a weaver's loom with threads of every hue and shade, arrayed in a dazzling, spangled line. Each color was wound on a spool the size of a bottle cap, which was nailed to the high front end of the wagon. Six or seven feet of each stretched across the body of the cart, pulled taut as a harp string. The loose ends flapped from the tailgate like wedding streamers. The row began on the left side with scarlet with all its near cousins, then lightened to blaze orange and butterscotch and continued into hazels and turquoises and, on the far right, indigo and iridescent violet. The blacks and whites and grays were in a second rank, which slanted at a shallower angle from spools set halfway down the cart.

Mounted at the very top of the cart was a spool as big as a reel of baling twine. The thread on it was bright gold—not a glittery gold, like cheap string whose component fibers aren't quite the same color, but the gold of a found bottle cap, or of milky coffee, or of the bus on a warm day when Livvy and Joey were taking it in turns to steal Hall's ball cap off his head. It shone with liquid intensity.

The thread peddler reached up and unwound a length of the gold thread with one hard pull of her arm. She drew it tight and fastened it to the tailgate, making a bright line above the level of the ordinary colored string. Next to the bulk of the spool, the gold thread looked as fine as spiderweb. It trembled slightly, vibrating itself to stillness. Livvy felt the motion like a hum in her chest.

The thread peddler produced a pocketknife, locked the blade open, and poised it over the strings. "Thread for sale!" she called. Her voice carried across the street and into Windrow Lane. "Colored thread, waxed thread, fishing line, leather lace! Embroidery floss and woolen yarn! Ribbon and shoestrings, hemp and nylon rope, narrow-gauge wire and twine in eleven colors! Knots untangled, straps replaced, thread for sale for five cents a yard!"

There was an excited murmur. The children crowded closer forming a line in front of the cart. Livvy stood on tiptoe and counted the number of people ahead of her. The peddler was leaning down, accepting a nickel proffered by a small child in a pink knitted hat. The little girl pointed at a strand of pastel yellow thread and the peddler pulled out a generous yard of it, making the spool whirl around the nail that held it in place. She cut the strand with one stroke of her pocketknife and handed it to the girl, who sped away, waving one end of the string while the other end dragged on the ground.

The line moved forward. Livvy noticed Joey and Hall standing just ahead of her. The peddler's lantern cast stark light on the near sides of the tree trunks. Every protruding root in the ground was flanked by a shadow as big as it was itself. The sky was dark now except for a single pale streak on the horizon, where the low clouds showed up purple.

The two girls from the bus walked away from the peddler's cart with multicolored tassels of embroidery thread. They moved forward again, and then Joey and Hall were at the front of the line. The peddler raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"Leather, please," said Joey. "Like the stitches on this." Hall held up a battered baseball glove.

"One yard?" said the peddler. "Two yards?"

Joey brought out a dime. "Ten cents worth."

"What about that?" Hall pointed to the big spool. "Is that real gold?"

The peddler took the coin from Joey's hand, smiling enigmatically.

"I'd like some," Hall persisted. He dug in his pants pocket and held out a nickel.

The peddler looked at him. She had strange, old, tawny eyes. "Is that the price of gold, boy?"

Hall flushed. "Don't think so," he mumbled.

The peddler reached into a cavity under the rows of colored and black-and-white thread and brought out a piece of stiff card with a thin strip of leather wrapped around it. Deftly she unrolled a length of the leather, measured two yards with her arms, and sliced it off with her knife. She coiled it swiftly and passed it to Joey.

"That will last a long time if you keep it oiled," she told him. "Keep an eye on it. Don't let it dry out and crack."

"I won't," Joey promised. The peddler nodded and turned to see who was next in line and her eyes settled expectantly on Livvy.

"And you?" she said. "What are you looking for tonight?"

Joey walked away, talking to Hall. Livvy shoved her hands into her pockets and pinched them into fists, the quarter digging into her fingers.

“I—” Livvy started. “I was wondering—I was wondering what makes your cart run.”

The thread peddler looked at Livvy curiously. “Interesting,” she said. Her eyes sparkled. “Some things always move. The stars, the breeze. The autumn comes and goes. Truly, it is easier to move than to stand still.”

“Is there an engine?” Livvy said.

The peddler laughed. “An engine? Oh no. Do you need an engine to grow older every day?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Livvy saw Joey walk away, talking to Hall. She shoved her hands into her pockets and pinched them into fists.

“Is there anything you would like to buy?” asked the peddler gently.

Livvy’s hand closed around something hard in her pocket, and all at once she understood. She held out her hand and opened it, showing the peddler Joey’s bottle cap, the lucky ginger ale.

“One yard of the gold, please,” she whispered.

The thread peddler took the cap and turned it over slowly in her hand. She exhaled like a gust of wind. “Yes,” she said. “This is a good price.”

With one stroke of her arm she set the big reel spinning and freed a hair-fine strand of the gold. Livvy stretched out a hand as if to touch it, but at the last moment she hesitated and pulled back.

The peddler’s knife came up against the thread, and suddenly it seemed more precious than sunlight, more loved than home, almost unbearably dear. A fiber inside Livvy’s chest was stretched across that knife, trembling taut and breaking.

It snapped, and the thread peddler placed the cut piece in Livvy's waiting hand. In Livvy's smeared vision, the thread in her palm pooled like molten gold.

The two-wheeled cart swung around to face the road, bouncing and lurching over tree roots. The thread peddler sat in her place at the front, muffled in her gray cloak and hat. On either side of her, the bars of the wagon tongue jutted into empty air. The cart rolled onto the asphalt and crossed the highway to Windrow Lane.

The weather had cleared; stars glittered high up in the dark. The wind rustled the dead leaves in a tree visible only as an oval of darker shadow. All along Windrow Lane the downstairs windows were lit, spilling enough light to show the texture of the grass in the front yards. Farther down the block a car pulled into a driveway, its tires making scratching noises on the pavement as it turned. Its headlights glared briefly against a garage door, then went out. A car door slammed.

The cart passed Marv's rust-spotted pickup truck and turned left, jolting onto a track that led on into a field of corn stubble. The wheels crunched loudly on gravel. The peddler's sheet of canvas lay in a crumpled roll at her back, leaving the spools of thread on the cart exposed to the night sky. In the starlight it was just possible to see the spool of gold thread revolving slowly, moving in rhythm with the cart's two wheels. For a moment, the light caught on something – a thin thread, perhaps, stretching ahead from the spool, pulling the cart onward into the distance – something that flashed gold.

## Chapter 2

### Medium

“Acrylics,” said Meghna. “Because I can. I’m done with freshman art class and I never have to hear Dillman drone about watercolors ever again.”

“Subtlety is key,” I said, mimicking Mr. Dillman’s monotone. “Muted and dilute.”

“Open mouth and shoot,” said Meghna. Her imitation was better than mine. “I’m going to paint an entire canvas in shades of orange. I’ll call it ‘Dillman’s Heart Attack.’”

I laughed. “Very subtle.”

Meghna took a bottle of orange paint off the shelf. We were in the craft store at the mall, browsing in the art supplies aisle. “Think I’d get in trouble with Ms. Rivera?” she said. “Dillman wouldn’t notice anything. He’d just blink and mumble about sloppy technique.”

“Probably,” I said.

“The man needs a good cup of coffee. Maybe then he’d have the energy to open his eyes all the way.” Meghna put the orange paint back on the shelf. “Have you decided what you’re going to do?”

“For the project, you mean?” I took a sketchpad from a display rack, changed my mind, and put it back. “I was thinking of doing something with pastels,” I said. “Or maybe just an ink drawing.”

Meghna rolled her eyes. “Wow, a drawing. You’re really pushing your boundaries there, Jess. Just use one of the four thousand in that notebook of yours.”

My hand went to my back pocket, where I kept my pad and pencil. “Those are just sketches. This has to be something good.”

“Yeah,” Meghna said. “This is probably the only time we’ll get to design our own projects. And Rivera is actually worth the effort.”

“What’re you going to paint?” I asked. There was a convex mirror mounted on the ceiling above us. I moved directly underneath it, turning my reflection into a button-round face between curving shelves.

“I want to do something with water,” Meghna said. Her reflection in the mirror was tapered like a top-heavy cone. I took out my sketchbook and started trying to draw her jeans and ponytail inside the arc of the mirror. “Not the ocean, though,” she said. “Everybody does the ocean. I want to do clear water.”

“Like a drinking glass?” I tilted my pencil and shaded in her hair.

“Well, something more exciting than that. Like the fountain over there.” Meghna pointed out the front of the store into the mall atrium. Between the up and down escalators was a pool the size of a ping-pong table with a single jet mushrooming out of the center. A thin man in red ski pants sat on the edge of the basin.

“Or maybe a different fountain. That one’s kind of boring.” Meghna looked at me. “What are you drawing?” She leaned forward to see my page.

I slapped the sketchbook shut, banging my elbow on a rack of seasonal decorations. A spray of fake maple leaves fell to the floor.

“Wow, full defense mode.” Meghna picked up the leaves and put them back. “You have state secrets in that notebook?”

“Just sketches,” I said.

“You don’t have to hide them,” she said. “I’ve seen some. They’re good.”



I mumbled something. Meghna shrugged and turned back to the paint shelf. “So how about you?” she said. “Know what you’re going to draw?”

I reopened my sketchbook and fiddled with my drawing, adding the scrunchie on Meghna’s wrist and the streaks on the linoleum floor. “I have some ideas,” I said.

Meghna turned to me with her hands on her hips, a bottle of white paint in each fist. “Don’t tell me,” she said. “You’re going to copy the mural.”

“I was thinking about it,” I admitted.

“Oh, come on, Jess.” It felt like Meghna was glaring down at me, even though she was a head shorter. “Everybody’s going to do the mural. Ms. Rivera is probably sick of it.”

“There’s nothing wrong with drawing the mural,” I said. “The mural’s amazing.”

“Yeah, but people copy it for all the wrong reasons. They want a piece of the magic.”

“It’s not like I’m trying to *do* magic,” I said defensively.

“Good,” Meghna said. “You’re not stupid, then. Can you imagine wasting your one chance on a school project?”

“It’s not like you can control when it happens,” I said.

“Well, maybe you can.” Meghna twirled a paintbrush thoughtfully between her fingers. “Ms. Rivera’s an artist, and she ended up with the mural.”

The mural was a legend. It was the reason the wait list for Ms. Rivera’s class was always full, even though you had to sit through a year of Mr. Dillman to get on it. The upperclassmen in the art department passed the story down to the freshmen in reverent whispers.

Years ago, before any of us were old enough for high school, Ms. Rivera had crammed the janitor’s trolley with cans of paint and parked it in front of the auditorium doors. The school

play was over for the year and the ticket window was closed and locked, the cinderblock walls bare of posters.

No one witnessed the next quarter hour. When the janitor put his head around the door, looking for his trolley, Ms. Rivera was standing in the middle of the hallway with her hands slack at her sides and a bewildered expression on her face. Cans and brushes were scattered for twenty feet in every direction. Drying purple paint sealed Ms. Rivera's shoes to the floor.

But the astonishing thing, the thing that made the janitor stand there speechless until the bell rang, was the mural. The ceiling, the floor, and both walls, from the ticket window to the emergency exit, were utterly transformed into a riot of color, swirls and bold strokes and half-seen images that covered the walls, the tiles, even the hinges of the doors.

Every year during the first week of school, freshmen slow to a stop in the middle of the hallway while the class-change crowd streams past on either side. Their mouths hang open and their eyes follow the spirals and whorls of paint – the blue star-shaped flowers in the ivy that surrounds the drinking fountain, the fireworks exploding across the auditorium doors, the clouds that drift across the floor and the suggestion of green land far beneath them. Some stare long enough to see the human faces that emerge when the sun from the windows strikes the wall. Thousands of people have walked over the floor and run their fingers over the walls, but the strokes and detailing have not faded in the least. It's never been painted over, either, even though it was technically an act of vandalism. There are always exceptions for a magic.

"I wish I knew how she did it," I said.

"She doesn't remember," Meghna told me. "I asked her once. She got all annoyed and told me she'd painted other things too."

“I guess she has.” I picked up a sketchbook again and pinched the first page between my thumb and forefinger, testing the thickness of the paper. “All those landscapes on the classroom wall.”

“They’re not very good,” said Meghna dismissively.

“What do you mean?” I asked, a little hotly.

“Well, it’s true,” she said. “They’re well-executed and all that, but they all look the same.”

“She’ll paint something amazing someday,” I said.

“No, she won’t.”

I slammed the sketchbook closed and shoved it to the back of the shelf. “Maybe it doesn’t have to be just once,” I said. “She could paint like that again if something inspired her.”

“That’s not how it works,” Meghna said. “Nobody gets a second time.”

“Well, maybe they haven’t tried hard enough!” I looked down at the floor. “It doesn’t even have to be a magic, you know? It just has to be *good*. If you work hard and you practice and you pay close attention, you could paint like that every time.”

Meghna was quiet for a minute, turning a paint bottle in her fingers. “So that’s why you want to paint the mural.”

“Sort of,” I said. “I want to know what it felt like. To do—that.”

“Have you ever seen a magic?” Meghna asked.

“No. Not besides the mural.” My dad told me once about his magic. It happened when he was in college. A driver honked at him while he was crossing the street, and all of a sudden the sound turned high and pure, like a harp, or the last note of taps played in an empty graveyard. He still dreams about that sound, my dad said. But the next minute, the driver honked again and he

had to get out of the way. That was it—one sound—and nobody heard except him and some girl in a convertible.

“I haven’t either,” Meghna said. She weighed two bottles of paint in her hand. “What do you think? Blue or white?”

“You could get both,” I suggested.

“True. I could do a dual-tone thing. That might be pretty cool, actually.” She looked at me. “Did you find everything?”

“Yeah.” I slid a pocket-sized sketchbook off the shelf. “I’m ready.”

We paid at the register and left the store. A man with trim silver hair was leaning over the second-floor railing in the atrium, holding a cell phone to his ear and gesturing. The thin man sitting on the fountain had not moved. His ski pants were smudged at the knees and the fabric swished as he swung his legs back and forth.

He stood up as we passed him and climbed up on the wall that surrounded the fountain’s pool. That got Meghna’s attention. “What’s he doing?” she murmured, leaning in close so he wouldn’t hear. He began to walk around the rim of the fountain, looking intently at the water jet in the center.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe he’s homeless.”

“That’s a brand-name jacket,” Meghna disagreed. “At least sixty dollars at the outdoor store.”

“He’s going to notice us staring,” I said uncomfortably.

“Okay, okay.” Meghna started moving again. “Hey, want to go to Capeman’s? They make good crepes.” She pointed to the top of the escalator. The name was painted in red and yellow script on a second-floor shopfront.

“Sure,” I said. “I’ve got ten dollars left.”

We rode up the escalator behind a woman in stiletto heels whose ankles wobbled so badly when she stepped onto unmoving ground that I thought she was going to fall. Behind her back Meghna caught my eye and grinned.

The crepe place was small, with brick-shaped rubber tiles and lamps hanging by metal cables from the ceiling. The wall opposite the counter was open on the atrium, with barstools lined up at a narrow table against the railing. I could see the fountain down below and the thin man standing on its edge.

The cashier was leaning on the counter, scrolling through her phone with one thumb. Her shirt had CAPEMAN’S CREPES embroidered over the breast pocket. She stood up straight when we came in and slid her phone into her pocket. “Hi,” she said. “What can I get you?”

“Hi.” Meghna glanced at the menu, which was chalked up on blackboards on the wall behind the counter. “I’ll have the banana split deluxe with chocolate sauce, please.”

“Sure.” The cashier’s blond ponytail fell over her shoulder as she punched it in. “You want a drink?”

Meghna got a pink lemonade, paid, and sat down at a table to wait for her crepe to be done. The cashier switched her gaze to me, and I realized that I knew her. Sam was one of the older kids who sat in the back of my math class. I was a little jealous of her. She had done her magic when she was only three. People peppered her with questions, wanting to know what it was like. She said it was hot like fire, or cold like ice, or both at the same time. She said it felt like you could do anything in the world.

“I’ll just get a crepe with, um, blueberries,” I stuttered. “And whipped cream.”

I wasn't sure if I should say hello or not, but then she said, "Hi, Jess. How'd you do on the test yesterday?"

I shrugged. "It was okay."

"I ran out of time on the last problem," she said. "Couldn't figure out how to factor that giant equation."

"Yeah, that one was kind of hard." I paid for my crepe with my ten-dollar bill. Sam picked my change out of the till with one hand and poised the other over the receipt slot, waiting for the machine to print.

"You're an art kid, right?" she said. "Did you ever have drawing with Mr. Dillman?"

"Yup," I said. "Most boring teacher alive."

"Is he actually alive, though?" Sam said. "I have him this semester. Yesterday he fell asleep right at his desk while we were sketching. A bunch of kids left before the bell and he didn't even notice."

The receipt scrolled into her hand and she gave it to me with my change. "Crepes'll be done in about ten minutes."

I nodded. Something behind my left shoulder caught Sam's eye, and her eyebrows shot up. "What's going on with that guy?"

I turned around. The thin man on the fountain had flung his hands out wide, like a singer coming onstage for an encore, except that his arms were as taut as wires. I had seen that posture at the circus, on a woman who was hanging from two silk ribbons, all her weight on her arms.

"What's he gonna do, dive in?" Sam said.

The man's arms rose a fraction, trembling with effort. Meghna jumped up from her chair.

"I swear the fountain got bigger for a second," she said.

The man raised his arms again and leaned forward, a conductor urging on his orchestra. This time all three of us saw the fountain stretch upward, like it was standing on tiptoe.

A woman in a black uniform ran into the atrium, talking urgently into a walkie-talkie. “No, no, no,” I said under my breath. “Go away. Leave him alone.”

“Excuse me, sir,” the security woman said loudly. “Excuse me, sir. I need you to step down from there.”

The thin man blinked at her. His arms moved slowly down, like a resting butterfly’s wings. “What?” he said.

“I need you to step down from the fountain, sir,” the uniformed woman said. “You’re alarming the other patrons.”

The man seemed not to hear her. His arms trembled, building up tension, and then shot toward the sky in a huge dynamic V. With a roar, the fountain leapt out of its basin, rising as high as the balcony, even higher. The silver-haired man stumbled backwards in alarm, his phone skittering across the floor. The jet of water collided with the ceiling of the atrium, sending mist flying in all directions. I shook the wet hair out of my face.

“Clear the area!” the woman from security was shouting. “For your own safety, please clear the area!” I saw her holding back a group of shoppers, who were jostling each other and trying to see over her head. One of them lifted a toddler onto his shoulders.

The thin man’s arms relaxed, and the water collapsed back into the pool with a crash. A wave rose over the rim of the pool and broke on the floor tiles.

On our floor, the high-heeled woman was back, trying to get onto the down escalator. A second official from security, a big, balding man with his walkie-talkie in a holster at his belt, was barring her way. “I’m sorry, ma’am,” he said. “I can’t interfere. This is a magic.”

“A magic!” Meghna breathed. We looked at each other.

“Maybe he’ll change the water into something else,” Sam said, trying to sound nonchalant. “I could use a chocolate fountain in this mall.”

The man on the fountain was swaying forward and back, slowly and hypnotically. The jet of water swelled and receded, responding to his movements like a charmed snake.

“He’s building up to it,” Sam said, watching him keenly.

“Have you seen a magic before?” Meghna asked her.

“I’ve *done* mine,” Sam told her. “When I was really little.”

“Really? What was it?”

Sam looked smug. My mother said once that it’s a shame Sam’s magic happened early, because it gives her nothing to hope for. Then she looked embarrassed and asked me not to repeat that. She is forty-one and her magic hasn’t happened yet. I used to hope I would come home from school one day and find a mural painted on the kitchen wall.

“I did it on a rose bush,” Sam said. “I was walking in the park. Well, I was too little to actually walk much, so my dad was carrying me.” It occurred to me all of a sudden that Sam probably didn’t remember her magic. I wondered if I had been right to be jealous of her all this time.

“We passed by this bush near the bridge,” she said, “and I held out my hand like I wanted to touch it. So my dad brought me closer, and when I touched the leaves—”

I gasped out loud. Meghna glanced at me and whirled to look at the fountain.

“—it bloomed,” Sam said quickly. “Even though it was March and the snow wasn’t even melted yet. It still blooms in March every year.”



Meghna and I weren't listening. The fountain's single jet had split into two streams that twined around each other like stripes on a candy cane. The man in the red ski pants was on the far side, hidden except for his outstretched hands. The sound of rushing water echoed in the foyer, resonating against the girders and glass on the ceiling. The group behind the security woman had grown into a crowd. They were holding up phones, videotaping and turning around for selfies.

The two jets fractured into four, then eight, then more, making thin cylinders of water that bend and merged in midair. They twisted around each other, rising as high as the top of the escalator in a liquid trellis that foamed and roared like a waterfall.

With a final little jump, like a basketball player making a shot, the water arced over the banisters onto the second-floor concourse. Meghna gasped, though it was nowhere close to us. The gray-haired man who had been leaning on the railing scrambled backward, his phone skittering across the tiles, but the water came no closer. It was impossible to tell if it was flowing up or down.

The rushing water sound stopped, and in the sudden silence I noticed how overwhelming it had been. I felt like a wad of cotton had been pulled out of my midsection, leaving an empty space below my rib cage. The cop, caught midsentence, said, “—temporary precaution, ladies and gentlemen—” and quickly lowered his voice.

The fountain was changing. Streams of water merged together, thickening and smoothing out, while strange corners appeared elsewhere. The rough white texture of the water was disappearing, as if a carpenter were polishing it away with a miraculous piece of sandpaper. The structure turned as transparent as blown glass and I realized what it was – a spiral staircase, climbing from the center of the fountain to the second floor. Here and there throughout were

fragments of red, reflected from the red ski pants and beanie. I looked at the center of the fountain, into the space between the stairs, and I saw the magic-maker himself.

His hair still stuck out from under his beanie and his arms were held away from his sides, like wings about to beat down. His eyes were wide open. Something about his expression made all the lines of his face seem to lead toward or away from those eyes, as if whatever he saw in the fountain was more important than all the experiences that had grooved the wrinkles into his skin.

I clawed for my sketchbook. That was it—that was what it felt like to do magic. It was like when you draw and draw and one line is exactly right, and you feel like you’ve touched the firmament; like when an image strikes your eye and a moment later it is there, complete, in your sketchbook. It was all there in his face.

A rush of mist exploded up from the fountain and the security woman raced forward. She emerged from behind the fountain half-carrying the thin man, her forearms under his armpits. His pants and the front of his jacket were wet. I realized he had fallen into the fountain.

The woman dragged him to a bench while the crowd swarmed around the transformed fountain, filling the arcing water with colors reflected from their clothes. A small boy escaped his parents and jumped onto the spiral stair, climbing up with hands and feet. A gasp went up. The boy’s father, reaching up to catch him if he fell, rested a foot on the first transparent step. It held his weight.

I took out my pencil and discovered that the point had snapped off in my pocket. “Do you have a pen?” I asked, turning around, but Sam had disappeared into the restaurant kitchen. I snatched a ballpoint from a cup by the cash register and began to draw.

“Look at the colors!” Meghna said, half to herself. “I should’ve bought pink paint . . . and yellow . . .”

I drew the curved rim of a fountain and sketched in the surface of the pool with wavering horizontal lines. I drew the craft store in the background, a sloppy square with a block-letter sign. There was the escalator with a woman on it, the second-floor railing, the skylights in the ceiling.

“No, I’m fine,” said the man in the ski pants. The security team was bent over him, offering water and warm jackets. “I was only here to have my watch fixed. I had it in a shopping bag—I don’t know where—has anyone seen it?”

The water on my sketch was a blurry tangle of lines, but that didn’t matter. A face took shape in the middle of the fountain, framed by spray and foam.

“Here are your crepes,” Sam said woodenly.

I moved my sketchbook to make space on the counter. “Thanks,” I said, glancing up, but Sam already had her back to me.

I almost had it: the solid wall of the basin, the intricacy of the water, the figure animating its center. I drew and drew over the outward-angling arms, the raised chin. Two eyes, large and dark, seeing what? Someday I would know.

Meghna was looking over my shoulder. “What’s that?” she said curiously.

I thumped the pen down on the counter. “That,” I said, “is what I’m going to draw for Ms. Rivera.”

## Chapter 3

### Cricket Lake

“You want to do what?” said Dr. Bailey. Her glasses made her look pop-eyed and slightly desperate. “Cam, the semester’s almost over.”

“I know,” Cameron said. “The thing is, this biology professor came to class and gave a really good lecture—”

“The last change was just approved,” Dr. Bailey said. “And I mean *just* approved. I haven’t even put it into the system yet. If the dean sees another of these with your name on it, you may have a heart attack on your conscience.”

She picked up a half-page red form from the desk and waved it back and forth.

APPLICATION FOR A CHANGE OF MAJOR, the heading read.

“But you teach microbiology,” Cameron said. “I thought you’d be all for it if I switched.”

Dr. Bailey put her elbows on the desk and ran a hand through her hair, making it stick up in tufts above her ears. “Cam,” she said, “how long have you been in college?”

Cameron looked bemused. “Almost a year.”

“And how many times have you changed your major?”

“Three.” At the look on her face, he added, “but I really hated accounting. And biology will be so much more useful than botany when I’m looking for jobs.” He brightened. “I could even go to medical school.”

“Hold on.” Dr. Bailey held up a hand. “I’m happy to help you move to the biology department if that’s what really interests you. However,” she went on as Cameron opened his mouth to speak, “at some point you need to pick a major and stick with it. I don’t want you to regret your choice, and I really don’t want you to be back here next month with another form.”

“I won’t be,” Cameron promised. “Biology’s right up my alley.”

“Here’s what I suggest,” Dr. Bailey pushed the red form toward him. “Hang on to that. Get yourself a summer job and think about other things for a while. I’m looking for an undergraduate to help out in my lab next year. If you’re still sure about biology when you come back in the fall, you can have the job.”

“I’d say yes if I had a summer job,” Cameron said. “People don’t like hiring freshmen.”

“We have a postdoc who’s hiring interns to help with the forest survey out at Cricket Lake,” said Dr. Bailey. “I’ll give her a call if you’re interested.”

“What kind of job is a forest survey?”

“An outdoor kind of job,” said Dr. Bailey. “Room and board included, but the sunscreen bills make up for that.” She smiled reminiscently. “I visited a few times last summer. You’ll love it.”

The bus left Cameron in the parking lot next to a pickup truck painted exactly the color of the rust spots on its tailgate. The trees were dripping from an afternoon thunderstorm that had left chevrons of fallen pine needles marching downhill across the gravel. A group of cabins, identical except that each front door was painted a different color, stood in a circle around an open-sided pavilion full of picnic tables. The nearest cabin had a wide front porch and a sign over the door that said LODGE.

Cameron climbed the steps to the porch, duffel bag bouncing against his hip. “Hello?” he called through the open door.

“C’mon in,” said a woman’s voice. “One second, I’ll be right there.”

Cameron stepped into a log-walled room that smelled faintly of peanut butter. There was a microwave running somewhere, but he couldn't see it under the clutter of boxes and binders that covered every available surface. In the middle of the room was a folding table piled with measuring tapes and hot-pink plastic flags. A man with a goatee stood near the window, writing on a screw-top jar with a permanent marker.

The woman who'd invited him in was bent over a computer in the corner under a wall of laminated maps. She straightened up. "Hey," she said. "We had a thunderstorm earlier," she explained as Cameron navigated around a heap of rubber boots. "When it rains out here, it's like the apocalypse rolling in. You're one of the interns?"

"Yeah. Cameron Wing."

She dug up a clipboard and marked off his name. "Welcome to Cricket Lake. I'm Hanna—I'm your go-to for questions, concerns, anything that comes up."

"UFO sightings," suggested the guy at the window. "Oil strikes." The peanut butter smell grew stronger as he opened the microwave and took out a bowl of something brown and melted.

"That's Pete," Hanna said, jerking her thumb over her shoulder. "He's our research tech." The two of them looked alike, with their tanned faces and cargo pants, though Hanna was compact like a hiker and Pete looked like a needle found in a haystack, tall and skinny with an explosion of hair.

"Hey, Hanna, I can answer questions too." Pete said. "You should tell him."

"You can take your questions to Pete if you want," Hanna said dryly. "I wouldn't trust him, though. He thinks it's okay to microwave Reese's pieces."

"It's pretzel dip," said Pete, looking injured.

"That's a good idea," said Cameron, looking at him with new respect.

“You’re the botany major, right?” Hanna asked Cameron.

“Biology,” Cameron said. “Unofficially. I’m trying to switch.”

“I did my undergrad in biology,” Hanna said. “I got through one year of med school, and then I quit for this.” She waved a hand at the office window, where the lake glinted between the pine trees.

“Tempting,” said Cameron, “but I think my adviser would have me transferred if I change my major again.”

“Come here a second,” Hanna told him. “I need your autograph on a few things.” She handed Cameron her clipboard and pen. “Just check through the contact info and sign there and there.”

He scribbled his name and handed the forms back. “Okay,” Hanna said. “Work starts tomorrow. We’ll meet at seven in front of the lodge and hike out from there. In the meantime, you can unpack and get settled. You’ll be in the green cabin. Meals are on a regular schedule—hang on, I have the info sheet somewhere.” She riffled through the papers on her clipboard. “Here we go. Mealtimes, emergency numbers, and a campsite map. The bathrooms are in the woods over here. Ask somebody if you can’t find them.” She tapped the page with the butt end of her ballpoint.

“Oh, good,” said Cameron. “Indoor plumbing.”

“Indoors, yes,” Hanna said. “I wouldn’t count on the plumbing. It’s a bit temperamental.”

“The men’s side is full of crickets,” Pete volunteered.

Cameron blinked. “What?”

“Crickets,” Pete repeated. “You know, little bugs that jump a lot.” He demonstrated with one hand, two fingers sticking up like antennae.

“He knows what crickets are,” Hanna told Pete.

“The name Cricket Lake gives people the wrong impression,” Pete said. “It’s more like Cricket Bathroom.”

“Yeah, that would bring the tourists out in droves,” Hanna said. “Quit harassing the interns, or they’ll make sure you sleep in Cricket Bed all summer.”

“I’m just telling him about the bathrooms!”

“Yeah, and he’s not going to squeal and run from the creepy-crawlies.”

“I don’t know,” Pete said. “The kid from New York looked pretty nervous.”

Hanna rolled her eyes for Cameron’s benefit. “Play nice, Pete.”

Pete ripped open a bag of pretzels and dipped one into his bowl of melted candy. “I didn’t even mention the wolf spider I found in the green cabin.”

Hanna snorted. To Cameron, she said, “If you see a spider, tell it Pete says hi.”

The cabin with the green door was two doors down from the lodge, facing the lake. There was a kid sitting on a log out front, scrolling through his phone. He had shoulder-length curly hair and jeans rolled up two inches above his boots.

“Hi,” Cameron said. “Are you with the forest survey?”

The curly-haired kid looked up. “Yeah.”

“I think we’re roommates,” Cameron said. “I’m Cameron Wing.”

“I’m Ira,” the kid answered. “From New York.”

“Oh?” Cameron said. “How do you like crickets?”

Ira looked at him sharply, then laughed when he saw Cameron was grinning. “Tell Pete I love ’em,” he said. “Creepy things with six legs are my favorite.”



He reached out with one long leg and nudged the cabin door open. “Most of the beds are taken already. A bunch of guys got here before I did. You can have the top bunk over mine if you want.”

“Thanks.” Cameron unslung the duffel bag from his shoulder and edged through the door.

Ira lingered outside the doorway. “I’d show you around, but I’m waiting for a spider to go away,” he said. “The mattresses are like rock, but it’s worth it for the minibar and ensuite. We’re living in luxury. Try not to hog the Jacuzzi.”

Cameron pitched his bag onto the empty bed. A handful of pine cone scales and a dead fly bounced up when it hit the mattress. “You don’t go camping much, do you?” he said.

“Not my thing. I mostly only exist on the internet.”

“Do you even have signal out here?” Cameron asked.

“About half a bar.” Ira checked his phone and made a face. “My girlfriend probably thinks I got eaten by a grizzly bear.” He blacked the screen and stuck the phone in his pocket.

“So what are you—sophomore? Junior?”

“Freshman,” Cameron said.

“Ooh, a young one!” Ira grinned. “Have you decided on a major yet?”

“Biology,” Cameron said. “If my adviser will let me. What about you?”

“I’m past my expiration date,” Ira said. “I start my fifth year in the fall. I’m majoring in architecture and minoring in everything. Marketing, xylophone, Spanish, art history—”

“Xylophone,” Cameron said.

“Just kidding. Most of the stuff I do is architecture-related.”

“Like forest surveys?”

“Except for that,” Ira admitted. “Adriana—my girlfriend—thinks I’m crazy. She says I should be in New York interning somewhere corporate.”

“Why did you come out here?” Cameron said.

Ira shrugged. “I told Adriana it’s a thing arts majors do. We need our time in the wilderness.”

“Fair enough,” Cameron said. “Do you know where the bathrooms are?”

“That way.” Ira pointed. “Way back in the woods, for maximum nighttime creepiness.”

“Thanks.”

Ira saluted with two fingers. “No problem. Hey, Cam—do you go by Cam? Camster? Camera? Chicken Wing?”

Cameron winced. “Whichever, but it’s on your conscience.”

“Cam. Get rid of those crickets for me, would you?”

At six forty-five the next morning a group of semiconscious interns collected in front of the lodge, slumping in the porch chairs and yawning. A few of them gnawed on peanut butter toast from the mess pavilion.

“Food?” Ira said incredulously as he and Cameron sat down on the porch steps. “These people got up in time for food?”

Pete was in a beanie and a fleece, putting measuring tapes and guidebooks into a cardboard box. Hanna stopped him in the doorway of the lodge and pointed to something on her clipboard, talking in a low voice. Cameron rubbed the back of his head. There was a lump of pine sap stuck in his hair. He had woken up with his head stuck to the inside of his sleeping bag.

“Morning, everyone!” Hanna called.

Pete appeared, balancing his cardboard box on his head and grinning. “Don’t look so cheerful!” he said. “I can’t stand people who are happy in the morning.”

Ira squinted at them through puffy eyes. “Evil twins,” he mumbled. Cameron stuffed his fist in his mouth to keep from laughing.

“I count twelve of you, so everybody’s here,” Hanna said. “You’ll know each other real well in a couple of weeks. Today we’re going up to the bluff to get you all trained on plant ID. Follow Pete—I’ll stay in back in case anybody gets lost.”

Cameron and Ira stood up, yawning simultaneously, and fell into line with the others. Pete led the way through the woods into the head-high cattails at the water’s edge. White mist curled up from the surface of the lake. A heavy drop of water fell from the reeds onto Cameron’s nose.

The path dipped down into a puddle of water scummy with pollen and algae.

Pete took a running step and leaped over the puddle, kicking over a rotted log with his back foot. Cameron had just enough time to catch a glimpse of the thick red millipede curled beneath the log before Ira yelped and took flight, landing with a splash on the far side of the puddle.

“Hey!” Cameron yelled after him. He eyed the puddle, gauging the distance across. “Not all of us are closet antelopes!”

Ira was already there when Cameron made it to the top of the bluff. He was propped on his elbows, facing the lake with a long grass stem drooping from his mouth.

“You took your time,” he said lazily, making the grass bob up and down.

Cameron flopped down beside him. “Millipedes are smaller than you are, you know.”

“Antelopes are faster than you are,” Ira answered loftily.

“Okay, everybody!” Hanna shouted. She jammed her boot into a foothold and vaulted to the top of a huge rock shaped like an upside-down bowl. “Get yourself some water and some bug spray—”

“Not from the same bottle, please!” Pete called.

“—and let’s split into two groups. Green and yellow cabins with Pete, red and blue with me.”

Ira flicked away his grass stem like a spent cigarette. On Cameron’s other side, a girl with a baseball cap and a blond ponytail screwed the cap onto her water bottle and threw it down in the rocks. As she got to her feet, she brushed the back of her hand across a blade of grass and caught a drop of dew on her palm.

Except it wasn’t dew. Cameron froze, eyes wide.

The blond girl glanced from side to side, then raised her hand to her mouth. The thing she was holding was too small to be a drop of water, too big to be a speck of dust. It was white and sharp-cornered, exactly like the kite-shaped glints of sunlight trapped in the dew all around. The girl was holding it like a solid object, not a trick of reflected light. She didn’t notice Cameron staring. As he watched, she popped the piece of captured light into her mouth like a salted peanut and swallowed it.

When Cameron walked into the cabin after dinner, Ira was lying stomach-down on his bunk, typing on a laptop. “Hey,” he said. “Are you as sore as I am?”

“Without being telepathic, it’s hard to say.”

Ira stretched his pinky to the top of the keyboard, typing an exclamation point. “My feet are killing me. I personally left footprints on every square inch of that bluff.”

Cameron climbed up to his bunk and sat down with his feet hanging off the end. He untied his boots, scraping round green burrs off the laces and letting them rain down on the floor. “When I close my eyes, all I see is pine needles.”

“Were you there when Pete had us ID poison ivy?” Ira said. “He wouldn’t tell us what it was. Not even when I touched it. I had to hike all the way down to the lake to wash my hands.”

Cameron’s left foot was stuck halfway out of its boot. He shoved at it with his other foot. “Still,” he grunted. “Way more fun than math homework.”

“Yeah, but unlike you, poor benighted science major, I don’t have math homework.”

The glow from Ira’s laptop screen gave him dark circles under his eyes. “I saw you staring at that girl this morning,” he said.

“Who?”

“Blond ponytail. She’s kind of cute, isn’t she?”

Cameron forgot about the boot. “Did you see what she did with the—” He stopped himself. If Ira had noticed her trick with the dew, he would have blurted it out then and there. “What are you typing?” Cameron asked instead.

“An email to Adriana,” Ira said. “Telling her all my poison ivy woes.”

“You found a way to get signal out here? Ha!” Cameron said triumphantly as the boot came off his foot. It fell four feet and hit the floor with a thud.

Ira yelped as a chunk of mud hit him in the eye. “Sorry,” Cameron said.

“No worries,” Ira said, wiping his face. “No, still no network. I’ll go to the lodge when I’m done and use the WiFi.”

“Hanna said she doesn’t want us using the WiFi for personal stuff.”

“I’ll go down on my knees and beg her,” Ira said. “My phone’s been silent for two days. This is what it feels like to go deaf.”

Everything in the mess pavilion came with a side of peanut butter – sandwiches, celery sticks, oatmeal, yogurt. Pete smeared some on Hanna’s drinking glass to make it stick to her hand when she took a sip of water. At lunch, Ira stopped the jar as it passed him on its way down the table and took a scoop out of it with his spoon. Somebody started collecting the empty jars and building them into a tower on one of the picnic table. At the end of the week, Pete had to make a grocery run especially for peanut butter.

He also brought a case of Coke from the gas station on the edge of town, where they still sold soda in old-style glass bottles. The interns mobbed him on the porch and divvied them up before he even had a chance to put them down. Three guys carried a picnic table over from the mess pavilion, swearing and dropping it every six feet to swat mosquitoes, and soon everybody was draped over the porch railings and chairs, talking so loudly that the sound echoed across the lake.

Cameron used the microwave in the lodge to make a bowl of popcorn. On his way to the porch, Ira intercepted him, brandishing a fresh jar of peanut butter and a spoon. “Looks like you’re missing something there,” he said.

Cameron held out the bowl. “Hit me.”

Ira dropped in two hefty spoonfuls and stirred until the whole thing was a goopy mess. “There,” he said. “Better now.”

They brought the popcorn outside and passed the bowl, starting a round of crunching and finger-wiping. Cameron squeezed between knees and backs and got himself a soda.

Pete had gotten hold of someone's empty Coke bottle. He was spinning it on the picnic table like a lopsided top. "Check it out!" he said. "Just like a breakdancer."

"I don't think Pete's ever seen a breakdancer," someone said.

"Yeah, so? They twirl around on the ground, right?" The bottle's spinning slowed and came to a stop. "New rule," Pete announced. "If this thing is pointing at you when it stops, you have to answer a question."

The mouth of the bottle was aimed at a red-haired girl mid-glug on her soda. "No fair!" she spluttered.

Pete snapped his fingers and pointed at her. "Can you break dance?"

She wiped her mouth. "Are you kidding me?"

"Good answer." Pete spun the bottle again.

Hanna came out of the lodge, rolling up a sheaf of paper and looking purposeful. "Anyone seen the blue tape measure?" she said.

"I, um, might have dropped it on the way home," said Ira. "Sorry. I was carrying about eight of them."

"That's okay. I'll look for it when we hike out tomorrow."

Pete crowed out loud, pointing both index fingers at Hanna. The Coke bottle was lying still, its mouth aimed directly at her.

She looked from Pete to the bottle. "What?"

"According to Pete's rules, you have to answer a question," Cameron told her.

Hanna shook her head. "I'm busy right now. The powers that be want an equipment inventory."

"Yeah, but those powers don't be on this porch," Pete said. "*I'm* the king of this porch."

“Hail the king!” somebody said, raising their Coke bottle.

Hanna cracked a smile. “Okay, your majesty, what’s the question?”

Pete tapped his chin. “Do you . . . ever . . .” He narrowed his eyes at her.

“Yes?” Hanna prompted. “Do I ever what?”

“. . . stop working?”

She whacked him with the rolled-up paper in her hand. “I’ll stop when you start.”

“Touche!” Ira yelled.

Hanna grabbed a Coke and disappeared inside. Somebody had switched on an electric lantern, inspiring a bunch of moths to join the party. Cameron stepped around the swarm and found a seat on the porch stairs.

Pete gave the Coke bottle another spin. It hit a warped board and juddered to an early halt. With a jolt, Cameron realized it was pointing directly at him.

“Kay!” Pete said, leveling his finger at the person on Cameron’s right. “You’re up.”

Cameron turned and recognized the girl from the blufftop. She was wearing her baseball cap again with her ponytail tucked through the back. “Here’s your question,” Pete said. “What’s your name short for?”

“Katelyn,” she said. She held a Coke bottle on her knees, both hands wrapped around it.

“Why not Kate then?”

“To help you out, Pete,” Kay said. “I figured you could handle a spelling with just one letter.”

Cameron laughed. She threw him a wry glance under the brim of her hat.

“I’ve never heard you talk before,” Cameron told her.

She flushed. “Nothing to say,” she mumbled into her Coke.



“I’m Cameron,” Cameron said as Pete leaned forward to spin the bottle again. “Don’t think we’ve been introduced.”

“Well, now you know I’m Kay.”

“What’s your major?” Cameron asked.

“Undecided,” Kay said. “What about you?”

“Botany,” he said. “But it used to be accounting. And I want to switch to biology.”

She smiled. “Sounds like you’re undecided too.”

Cameron laughed. “Pretty much. I might stick with biology, though. My adviser offered me a job.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, as an assistant in her lab. She’s a professor of microbiology.” Cameron had been reading Dr. Bailey’s website using the lodge WiFi. “She works with cyanobacteria.”

“Aren’t they the ones that—they photosynthesize, don’t they?” said Kay.

“Right,” said Cameron, surprised. “They eat nothing but water and light. Completely clean energy.”

“Light is the cleanest thing there is,” Kay said seriously.

Cameron wasn’t sure what to say to that. Kay finished her soda and put the bottle down on the steps. “So what kind of work would you be doing?” she asked.

“Just data entry for now,” Cameron said. “But if I stay long enough, they might let me work with the bioreactors.”

“So it’s an office job,” she said.

“Well, yeah. Pretty much everything is.”

“That’s not true.”

Cameron was surprised by her tone. “What’s wrong with offices?”

“The fluorescent lights.” She paused and laughed at herself. “That sounds stupid. But they’re—they’re a bit toxic, you know? Like they’ve been chlorinated.”

Cameron shrugged. “You get used to them after a while.”

“I don’t want to get used to them,” Kay said. “I wish there was a job where I didn’t have to.”

Cameron leaned back on his elbows, looking at the firefly-speckled pines. “After this summer,” he said thoughtfully, “fluorescent lights would be hard to take.”

Kay’s smile grew warmer.

There was a whoop of laughter from the porch. Cameron looked up. “Pete should have his own show,” he said.

“He was in a standup club in college,” Kay said. “Hanna told me.”

Her attention shifted back to the trees. Cameron unlocked his phone and checked the next day’s weather. When he looked up, Kay was hunched over, her cupped palms poised around a firefly.

Her fingers moved, and then a dark bug jetted away, vanishing into the darkness. It left behind a slub of gold light on the ball of Kay’s thumb. She licked it up like a piece of peanut butter popcorn.

“How did you do that?” Cameron demanded.

Kay jumped and jerked her head around. She hadn’t known he was watching.

“That thing with the light,” Cameron said. “I saw you do it before, too. On our first day.”

Kay gazed at him under the brim of her hat. In the dark, her expression was hard to read—it might have been wary, or angry, or thoughtful. Cameron shifted uncomfortably.

After a moment, she reached out deliberately and picked up Cameron's Coke bottle and hers from the step between them. Then she stood and climbed up the porch stairs. The camping lantern sat on the top step, staining the floorboards with the yellow of an old incandescent bulb. Kay crouched over it, and with a matter-of-fact motion like someone scooping ice from a cooler, she filled first her bottle, then Cameron's, with lantern light.

She held out Cameron's bottle for him to take back. His fingers closed around it automatically; he couldn't quite form words. He tilted the bottle back and forth and the light flowed along the walls, thick and translucent as honey.

Kay watched his face, her smile widening. "Cheers," she said. She clinked her bottle against Cameron's and drained it in three gulps.

Cameron stared down at his bottle. The glass glowed, turning his fingers pink, as if he were holding them against the bulb of a flashlight.

"Go on," Kay said.

He looked at her, then lifted the bottle to his lips and drank. It tasted warm and bright, and there must have been some Coke left in the bottom of the bottle, because it was also sweet.

One day at lunch, Hanna walked into the pavilion with Dr. Bailey. Cameron and Ira were at the buffet table, ladling tomato soup from a crockpot.

Hanna glanced at them just as Ira stirred a scoop of peanut butter into his portion, turning it a yellowish-orange. "You heathen," Hanna said. "That's not even food any more."

"It's nutritious," Ira informed her. He swallowed a spoonful with an exaggerated slurp. "Full of protein."

Hanna shook her head. “Hey, everyone!” she shouted above the noise in the pavilion.

“Can I have your attention for a minute?”

The interns quieted. Cameron and Ira made their way back to their seats.

“This is Jen Bailey,” Hanna said. Dr. Bailey waved. She was dressed in shorts and a wide-brimmed hat. “She’s here to collect some algae samples from the wetlands on the other side of the lake. I’m going to take her over there this afternoon. We have enough kayaks for a few more people to come with us—”

An excited babble rose up from the tables. Hanna waited for quiet. “How many are interested?”

Cameron put up his hand. He nudged Ira, who shook his head and kept both hands firmly in his lap. “I’ve seen the kayaks,” he said. “They’re full of ants.”

“Okay,” Hanna said. “We’ll take Richard, Jasper, Cameron”—Cameron grinned—“and Kay.” Cameron’s head whipped around. Farther down the table, Kay ducked her head, looking at her plate.

“That’s it,” Hanna said. “Sorry we can’t take more. Meet at the dock after lunch.”

There were four kayaks—two single-seaters and two double-seaters. Hanna claimed the single-seaters for herself and Dr. Bailey. Richard and Jasper claimed a boat for themselves, leaving Cameron with Kay.

“Either of you been in a kayak before?” said Hanna, facing them with her hands on her hips. Kay nodded.

“Good,” Hanna told her. “You sit in front. The front guy steers,” she explained to Cameron. “The back guy paddles like crazy. Don’t worry, it’s easy.”

The kayak wobbled as they climbed in, puffy life jackets zipped up to their earlobes. Kay shoved her paddle against the dock and they drifted out onto the lake, bobbing next to the others. A moment later Hanna joined them, steering her kayak with quick strokes. She twirled her paddle over her head like a helicopter propeller, flinging water everywhere. Dr. Bailey flinched and spluttered. Hanna plunged her paddle into the water and hollered, “Let’s go!”

They started across the lake, paddles dipping and flashing in the sun. It was a gorgeous blue-skied afternoon, dragonflies hovering over the reed beds, reflections wavering on the surface of the water. Cameron copied Kay’s motions, trying not to clash his paddle against hers. Droplets like chains of glass beads showered down on the boat.

“You’re splashing me,” Kay said, amusement in her voice.

“I’m splashing me, too,” Cameron said. He was grinning. Kay twisted around and grinned back, her baseball cap splotched with water. Up ahead of them, Hanna whooped.

Kay stopped paddling in the middle of the lake, and so Cameron did too, letting his paddle rest across the gunwales. Their momentum carried them onto flat still water, ripples spreading in their wake. Kay lifted a hand, shielding her eyes from the glare off the water.

She glanced back at Cameron, almost mischievously, and slipped her hand under the rim of the boat, where the blue plastic of the kayak dyed the sunlight a vivid shade of cerulean. Kay twirled her hand, gathering blue light around her fingers like a skein of cotton candy. She took a bite and then held it over her shoulder, offering it to Cameron. He tried to pull off a piece, but it dissolved into the air.

That afternoon the pressure dropped and the sky clouded over. Hanna ended the expedition early. “It’s going to rain,” she said. “I don’t want us getting caught out here in a thunderstorm.”

The wind picked up as they paddled home, riffling the surface of the lake and bending the trees, flipping the pale undersides of the leaves toward the sky. Kay's ponytail blew into Cameron's face. He lost his rhythm, and their paddles clacked together, stopping their forward motion. "Sorry!" Cameron shouted. The kayak shifted, turning broadside to the waves, and they fought to bring it back into position.

Hanna doubled back in her single kayak to check on them. "Almost there," she yelled, dipping her paddle into the water to keep the wind from blowing her off course. "Not bad for a novice, Cam."

"Do these things ever flip over?" Cameron yelled back.

"All the time!" Hanna called. To Cameron's utter astonishment, she tightened a strap around her waist and barrel-rolled, dipping into the water and popping back up again. She grinned at them, wiping water out of her eyes. "Quit staring, people! Paddle!"

The rain hit just as they reached the shore, filling Cameron's eyes and pounding straight through his T-shirt to the skin. Hanna jumped up on the dock ahead of them, stretched out a paddle to Kay, and towed them the last five feet, slamming their kayak into the pilings with a dull crack. Dr. Bailey grabbed Cameron's arm and helped him up to the dock.

"Close one," she said as a crack of thunder made the planks shake. Cameron hadn't even seen the lightning.

"Back to camp!" Hanna was yelling. "We'll put the kayaks away later—back to camp!"

Cameron hung back, waiting for Kay. She was standing at the end of the dock, face turned up into the rain.

"You coming?" Cameron shouted. Kay nodded and backed slowly down the dock, eyes darting from horizon to horizon.

A flash of lightning cracked across the sky. Kay whirled around, grinning from ear to ear. “Run for it!” she yelled. Thunder boomed behind them as they sprinted for the woods.

The rest of the summer was a blur – dew, mosquitoes, sunscreen-laced sweat, weird beetles to show to Ira, permanent dirt under the whites of the fingernails. One evening, after Pete won an arm-wrestling tournament in the mess pavilion, he shinned up a pillar to the roof and bayed like a wolf, raising answering howls from dogs all across the lake. Cameron collapsed onto his sleeping bag every night and dreamed about pines so tall they disappeared into the clouds.

There was a farewell party on the last day of the summer, but it broke up early to give everyone time to pack. Ira made a sweep of the camp, collecting shoes lost in the undergrowth and bottles of sunscreen that had taken up permanent residence in the mess pavilion. He hauled his finds from cabin to cabin in a wheelbarrow, calling, “Sneakers, one dollar! Hoodies, two dollars! Four bucks for a soccer ball—five if inflated! Ponchos come free. I’ve got about a million.”

“That’s my hoodie!” someone yelled.

“It is?” Ira said. “I could give you a discount.”

“It’s got a huge bug on it.”

Ira flinched, checked the sweatshirt, and brushed a cricket off the hood. “Do I get a finder’s fee?”

Cameron packed his bag and sat next to it on his bunk, listening to two cabinmates argue over a missing sock and thinking about studying biology. A spider riding a strand of silk

descended from the rafters onto his knee. He stared at it for a second, then flicked it away and went out the cabin door with his flashlight.

The porch at the lodge was covered with boxes, and Hanna was arguing with Pete, jabbing a pen emphatically at a list on her clipboard. Cameron passed them by and headed down the path to the lake.

It was a wet night. A storm had come through that afternoon, and the sky was still marbled with clouds. Drizzle hung in the air. Cameron crossed over the puddle at the low point of the path, jumping from a clump of grass to a rock and back to solid ground. He made his way toward the bluff, aiming his flashlight to one side and then the other. The missing blue tape measure had never turned up; it was probably somewhere in the underbrush.

On the blufftop ahead, a light blinked on and then off again, like a miniature lighthouse signaling to kayaks on the lake. Someone was up on the bluff, playing with a flashlight. The beam swung up toward the sky, making a faint cone in rain.

Cameron crested the hill and his flashlight landed on Kay, sitting on the bowl-shaped rock with her arms wrapped around her knees. She wasn't wearing her baseball cap. Wisps of wet hair were stuck to her forehead in a pattern like lace.

"Hey, Cameron," she said.

"Hey."

He sat down beside her, so close their shoulders almost touched. "So," she said. "Back to school, I guess."

"Yeah. I start work in the lab next week."

"Right." She sniffed. "Cyanobacteria. Fluorescent lights."



The rain was growing heavier. The drops that slid down Kay's face might have been rainwater or tears.

"What about you?" Cameron said. "Excited to go back?"

"No," she said. "I'm not very good at responsible things. Choosing a major. Working in an office. I'll miss this summer."

Lightning flickered above the trees. Kay said abruptly, "It keeps getting harder."

"What does?"

"The—" She cupped her hand over the bulb of her flashlight and brought it away empty. On the second try, she came away with a palmful of pink-tinged light. "It gets harder all the time. I'm afraid someday I'll reach for it and I just—won't be able to—"

Cameron hesitated, then slid closer and put an arm around her shoulders. She was warm to the touch, though her T-shirt was soaked.

"Have you ever caught a star?" he asked.

Kay laughed. "What?"

Cameron reached up and made a plucking motion. "I figured you could pick them like cherries if you wanted."

"I wish I could," Kay said. "I've never been able to reach them."

She flipped her flashlight over and balanced it on the palm of her hand, bulb pointing toward the sky. It tipped forward and she followed it, finding its center of balance.

Cameron darted a hand forward and snatched away the flashlight, like a magician whipping the tablecloth out from under a set of dishes. The faint cone of light from the bulb dropped straight into Kay's hand.

Startled, she moved her hand back and forth, making the light sway from side to side. Then she threw Cameron a sidelong grin and tilted the light toward him, letting it fall. He yelped and closed his eyes as it crossed over him like a searchlight beam. When he opened his eyes again, the light was gone and Kay's face was close to his. She was smiling.

Thunder boomed, much closer than Cameron had been expecting, and Kay rocketed to her feet. "A storm!" she said breathlessly. "There'll be more lightning. Wait."

Cameron stood up slowly. Kay watched the clouds, lips slightly parted. Water dripped from the end of her ponytail.

Then it came—a silent flash that turned the pines from black to green, their needles outlined precisely against a stark white sky. Cameron blinked. Kay was standing with her arms flung out, muscles tense and trembling. The sky was daylight-bright, and Cameron realized she was holding on to the lightning, freezing the moment in place.

Hardly daring to breathe, he turned slowly in a circle. A circular ripple was expanding on the surface of the lake, from a fish or a nighttime predator. A fallen tree trunk slanted from the shore into the water, its leaves hanging limp. The footholds in the rock they stood on were sharp black hollows, worn smooth from a summer's worth of sneakers. Cameron looked down toward camp and saw the boat shed, the quartz glinting in its shingles, as if it was midafternoon on some perfect day with the crickets loud in the woods.

"How long can you hold it?" Cameron whispered.

She started to say something, but then the thunder rumbled again and the light was gone.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Moonshine**

I got hooked when I was thirteen. It was a Saturday afternoon in March, and I was up in the hills with my older brother Shawn, patching a leak in the cabin roof. I remember the road was full of fresh gullies that made the truck do a little four-beat gallop as each individual tire dropped in and popped out. Skinny pines stuck out of the snowbanks like rafters in an A-frame house. Shawn drove over a bramble bush that had flopped across the entrance of the driveway and parked the truck in front of the porch. I hopped out of the cab and swore out loud when my foot went straight into a cold puddle. There was a faint half-moon in the sky above the cabin.

We set up the ladder and stripped all the rotten shingles off the roof, and then I carted them back to the junk heap while Shawn went up the ladder with a hammer in his belt and started bludgeoning around. I kept quiet for a whole five minutes before it got to be too much.

“Hey!” I yelled up at him. “Helps if you put the nails in straight!”

“I’m putting them in perfect.” Shawn whacked the roof with his hammer. I could feel the shingles splintering.

“You’re putting holes in the tarpaper,” I said. “You are creating new leaks while I stand here watching.”

“I got an A in shop class.”

“You failed shop class,” I said. “Gimme the hammer.”

I fixed up the tarpaper, then started peeling new shingles off the block and nailing them down. My gloves got soaked from the melting snow running down from the ridgepole. Shawn held the ladder and made sure to shake it when I was doing something extra fiddly.

“Move it over to the left,” I said.

“Move yourself first,” Shawn said. “I ain’t lifting this thing with you on it.”

I hopped up and sat on the roof with my legs dangling while Shawn shifted the ladder. There were two pockmarks in the mud where the feet had been.

“You about done yet?” Shawn said when I got back on.

“Almost.”

“How about now?”

“Getting closer.”

“Are we *there* yet?” he said ten seconds later. He could put on a whine like a drill bit.

“What are you, three years old?” I asked him. “Find some patience.”

“My patience is gone,” he said. “You’re working so slow—”

“Slow?” I ripped up a rotten shingle with a crack and sent it whizzing over his head.

“You wish I was slow. You might actually have time to dodge.”

Shawn bent over the spot where the shingle had landed and prodded it with his boot.

“Right into the mud. Deadly aim, Mags.”

It’s open season on nicknames if you’re named Margaret, but Mags is the stupidest of all stupid options. Cap Callahan got a black eye for calling me that when we were kids. Shawn’s the only one who gets away with it. Brothers have some privileges.

“I’ve got aim like a sharpshooter,” I told him.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Shawn said. “Roof, Mags. Fix it. Sometime this century.”

I nailed in the last few shingles and climbed down. Shawn hefted the ladder onto his shoulder, steadying it with one hand, and we stood back to look at our work.

“Not bad,” Shawn said.

I made a derisive noise. The fresh shingles looked like weird blond fungus.

“Well, it’s watertight, anyway,” Shawn said. “Lunch?”

“Past time.”

Shawn heaved the ladder into the truck bed while I got the food out of the cab. “Heads up,” I said, and threw his sandwich at him. We ate on the front step, water dripping off the eaves into our laps.

Shawn leaned over and sniffed my sandwich. “Baloney?”

I took a bite. “That a problem?”

He shrugged and went back to his own sandwich. “You want to eat rubber, I won’t stop you.”

“You won’t,” I agreed, mouth full.

Shawn squinted one eye at a slug climbing his boot, took aim, and flicked it away. I leaned back on one hand and looked at the woods. The moon was dipping behind a grove of hemlock trees up the hill.

“Have you seen Cap’s flowers?” Shawn asked me.

I swallowed my last bite of sandwich. “Cap as in Cap Callahan?”

“Yeah.”

“He grows flowers?” I said.

“You’d like them,” Shawn said. “Want to come see?”

“That depends,” I said. “What kind of flowers?”

Shawn shrugged. “Want to come see?”

“Oh, we’re being mysterious now,” I grumbled. “Why can’t you just tell me?”

Instead of answering, he stood up and waved at me to follow him. I heaved a big sigh and got up off the step. “You’re probably leading me into a bear trap.”

“I would never,” he said. “Who’d be that mean to a bear?”

We struck out through the woods uphill of the cabin. A cloud drifted across the sun, muting the light that shone through the bare trees. Tiny dark green myrtle leaves sprouted from the ground. We came to a hemlock grove and Shawn slowed down, moving almost on tiptoe.

“Are we there yet?” I whined.

Shawn jabbed me in the ribs. “Shh. Look.”

The needles overhead cast a dense shadow on the forest floor, making me squint. I gasped. There in the dimness, something was shining.

“Go on.” Shawn gave me a push.

I moved forward cautiously, hands outstretched. The light was coming from a cluster of flowers, blue-purple blooms of a kind I recognized from my walks around the cabin. Every plant had a column of stacked blossoms, like a magic wand rooted in the leaf mold. Each petal was alight with a shimmering deep-blue luminescence.

“What are they?” I breathed.

“It’s just glow,” said Shawn, trying to sound dismissive. Glow is just about the cheapest supernatural out there—low-wattage stuff, available in a million different forms. It’s easy to get hold of if you know where to look, which I didn’t at the time.

“These are Cap Callahan’s flowers?” I looked at Shawn. “Cap Callahan is a dealer?”

“Aw, nothing that bad,” Shawn said. “He figured out you can get a lot of glow if you mix it with seeds and let ’em grow.”

“You told him he could plant them here?”

“Don’t worry, Molly,” he said. “Nobody ever comes up here.”

I reached out and pinched one of the stems. “Don’t—” Shawn started, but I had already plucked a wand of flowers from its stalk. It swayed in my hand, bright as moonlight.

I tucked the spray of blooms behind my ear and grinned at Shawn. “Cap won’t mind,” I said. “What kind of flowers are they?”

“Wild something.” He frowned. “Wild false indigo. That was it.”

On the day the judge slams his gavel down and asks why I decided to traffic supernaturals across two counties in defiance of the laws of Virginia, that’s the story I’ll tell them: the cabin, my brother, blue flowers in my hair, and the moon winking between the needles, like it was letting me in on a secret.

Shawn sobered up after high school. He left the cabin and the pickup to me and got himself a job at the electric company and a little house outside of Huntsville. He’s Katy Bigelow, who loves him almost as much as she loves indoor plumbing, and two daughters. The whole family comes up to visit me in the summers, and the kids run wild while the parents stare around them in disbelief, Katy at the outhouse and Shawn at me. It’s best if he doesn’t know what I do for a living.

One Friday evening late in the spring, I filled the truck with the last of my gasoline and loaded up the bed with all the empty gas cans. There were at least ten of them and they clattered

all over each other when I slammed the tailgate. I was cleaned out of gas and groceries and I needed to make a run into town.

I put my toolbox in the passenger seat and drove down the gravel switchbacks toward Huntsville, the suspension creaking over every pothole. The truck was a hand-me-down from Shawn and it was in the last stages of decrepitude. I just didn't have the money or the heart to replace it.

I turned onto the highway, a two-laner that dipped and jinked between straight-trunked trees. A siren blurped behind me and I swore and pulled over, watching the squad car in the rearview mirror. The cop ground to a halt on the shoulder and heaved himself out the driver's door belly first. It was Ephraim from the Huntsville police—almost as many grandkids as chins. I wiped my sweating palms on my shirt as he waddled over to my car.

He planted his feet outside the door and rested his elbows on my rolled-down window. "Molly," he said in a disappointed tone. "I'd swear you were just doing fifty in a thirty-five zone."

"Probably about right," I said. He raised an eyebrow and I added, "Sir."

"Careful letting those respectful words in your mouth," Ephraim said. "You'll have a reaction." He chuckled. "I bet there's never a day you don't take that corner like a drag racer."

"What are you talking about, Ephraim? Yesterday I dipped all the way down below forty."

"Well, I appreciate you doing your part for my quota," he said. He flipped open his leather notebook. "Let's see. Margaret Gipton, black F150. Birthdate 8/89. License number 397-something-something. Or is it 398? Seems I don't quite have it memorized yet."



I got out my license and the truck registration and handed them through the window.

“Thank you.” Ephraim scribbled numbers on his pad. “How are those nieces of yours?”

“Doing well,” I said. “It’s Emma’s birthday this week.”

Ephraim He ripped the page from his notebook with a decisive sound. “I’m going to go put this in the computer. Won’t be a minute.”

He came back wearing a stern face. “Seems this is your third offense in six months. Now, I’m not going to write you up, because then I’d have to suspend your license, and I’d hate to have to give you a ride into town every day. But consider yourself warned.” Ephraim tapped my license and registration meaningfully on the bottom of the window before giving them back to me.

“Yes sir officer sir,” I said. I reached for the ignition.

Ephraim held up his hand. “Got to do the search,” he said.

I grimaced internally. The cops knew there were supernaturals coming out of the hills. They raided a cabin up there occasionally, but they weren’t even going to try to clear out all the shacks and hill camps in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Instead they searched every car that got pulled over near the county line, which on a fairly regular basis included me.

Supernaturals aren’t against the law. You see them in every brand of wrinkle cream on the market, advertised for that magical smoothing power. But unlicensed supernaturals are very, very illegal. The cops are terrified that some home brewer will come up with a recipe for explosives or invisibility, and they’ll get stuck in a firefight against criminals they can’t see. Cap says that’s ridiculous, that no backcountry hick is going to solve a problem the corporations have been stuck on for decades, but I’m not so sure. Brewers are an oddball bunch. They’ll pull a wool sweater out of the back of the closet, add in cinnamon jellybeans, and cook up a

handwarmer so potent that one pinch sets your sleeves on fire. Their stuff sells better than any watered-down corporate product.

“Course,” I told Ephraim. “I know the drill.” I got out of the truck and began opening up the cargo lockers on the outsides of the truck bed.

Ephraim poked his head into the cab, checked the glove compartment, and looked inside my toolbox, nodding over the array of wrenches and brushes. “Plumbing job today?”

“The Indigo has a blocked pipe.”

I can turn my hand to most repair jobs—plumbing, carpentry, electrical too. People around Huntsville and call me in to fix little leaks and breakages.

The Indigo?” Ephraim wiggled his eyebrows. “You’re going to Cap’s on a Friday night?”

I gave him a look.

He held up his hands. “Christ, Molly, you’d think I’d accused you of murder. Cap’s a nice guy.”

I glared at him again. “All right, all right,” he said. “Let’s see what’s in the back.” He shut the passenger door and glanced at the pile of toppled-over gas cans in the truck bed. “Filling up?”

“Yeah. I’m almost out.”

Ephraim picked a can out of the mess and shook it, making a swishing noise. “Bout half a can left in there.”

I nodded. “Enough to get me to the gas station if I get held up somewhere.”

Ephraim put the can down and turned to the cargo lockers. “I’ll just take a look in here, then, and you’ll be on your way.”

He stooped, breathing a little heavily, and peered to the back of each compartment. Spare tire in the cabinet behind the driver's door; hacksaw, drill bits and duct tape behind that. A bad smell from the long shelf above the wheel well—Ephraim ducked backward, waving his hand in front of his nose. "Might want to throw out that sandwich, Molly," he said.

"Sorry," I said. "Forgot I left that in there."

He circled to the passenger side. "This one's stuck," he grunted, tugging on the handle of the big cabinet.

"Has been for years." I joined him and gave the door a yank with no result. "The lock's smashed, remember? Though I'd be much obliged if you could get it open."

Ephraim wrestled with the door a few minutes longer, then gave up. He finished his search while I admired the broken lock. It was twisted nicely and centered in the middle of a sizable dent. Took me half an hour with a pair of pliers and a rock.

"Well, that's everything," Ephraim said, slamming the last locker shut. "You have a safe drive now, Molly. Pay attention to those pretty black-and-white signs with the numbers on."

"Sure, Ephraim," I said. "You know what a good citizen I am. Say hi to Susan for me."

He got into his squad car and drove off, waving as he passed. The sound of his motor faded into the distance, and I felt my shoulders relax. I eased up the clutch and started the truck.

Gas was up twenty cents at the Huntsville station. I filled my gas cans and topped up the tank, then stepped inside and got a jumbo jar of animal crackers. Emma loves animal crackers. She insists that the camels are horses and saves them for last. I put the jar in the passenger seat and drove on to the Indigo.

Cap scraped together a decent amount of money selling glow and animance in his teens, and when he turned twenty-one he put a down payment on a derelict bar off the Huntsville-Huntsville highway and set about fixing it up. I saw the sign a quarter mile away, glowing blue through the leafless trees. I knew it was plain neon, not glow, but the color still startled me. It's Cap's private joke. He's got it right out in the open, if you want to know what the Indigo really sells.

I pulled around back and got out of the truck, slamming the door loud enough to be heard inside. They know me at the Indigo. I was just starting to unload when Cap came out the kitchen door, his blond hair in an electroshock mess. He was wearing a leather jacket he'd had since he was a teenager. It's gained crow's feet and laugh lines at the same pace as his eyes.

"What's up?" he said eagerly. Cap always talked and moved in spurts, as if propelled by a jet pack. "Got anything?"

I set my toolbox on the ground. "I heard tell of a bust pipe."

He followed me around the back of the truck. "Well, I heard tell of a good haul."

"Don't know where you heard that, Callahan, it's slim pickings in the hills these days."

"Nothing from Dave Bramley?" Cap asked. I rummaged through the gas cans, looking for the one that was half full.

"No. He can't work 'til beets are back in season." I found the gas can "Here," I said, putting it into his hands.

He unscrewed the lid and peered inside. A bluish glow lit his face like the glare from a computer screen. "Flowers still going strong?" he said.

"They get dimmer every year," I told him. "Too much cross-pollination."

“That’s all right,” Cap said cheerfully. “There’s no shortage of glow. Pretty good market’s sprung up in Richmond in the past few months. What else you got for me?”

I opened the long, narrow locker over the wheel well on the driver’s side. Cap wrinkled his nose at the smell of rancid baloney. “Do you have to keep the rotting sandwich in there?” he said.

“Alisha’s stuff reeks,” I said. I pushed the Tupperware aside and pulled out a paperboard box labeled for 2” Phillips-head screws. “Like truck exhaust and soot. Someone might notice.”

“Molly, you drive a truck. It always smells like truck exhaust.”

“Like this?” I cracked open the box and swiped it past Cap’s nose. He gagged and clapped a hand over his mouth.

“Thought so,” I said. “That’s the kind of thing the cops will notice when they stop me.”

Cap froze in the act of taking the box. “You got stopped?”

“For speeding.”

“You *idiot*,” Cap said. He spun away from me and started pacing up and down the parking lot. “Did they search?”

“They always do. Calm down, Cap, it was just Ephraim. He’s like the uncle I never had.”

“Are you crazy?” Cap said. He stopped walking and flung his arms out in disbelief. When he’s agitated, he looks like he’s dancing the YMCA. “He could’ve opened that gas can and—”

“But he didn’t,” I interrupted. “Because I’m a professional. Literally speaking, since I hope you’re going to pay for all this stuff.”

“Okay, okay.” Cap closed his hand around the cardboard box. “Usual cigs from Alisha?”

“Yeah.” I opened the box again to show him the rows of neat drugstore rolling papers.

Cap recoiled from the smell. “I can’t believe people smoke that stuff.”

“I can’t believe Alisha brews that stuff.”

Alisha Bigelow lived in an apartment right behind the Huntsville truck depot; she distilled the stuff for her cigarettes out of the diesel fumes in the air, using a toy chemistry kit that she set up on the windowsill. She got me to try a cigarette once, back when she first came up with the recipe. The first puff lifted me right off my feet. I bobbed around under the ceiling until the levitation wore off and I had coughed up the whole lining of my throat.

Alisha also had eternal trouble with her fuses, which gave me plenty of excuses to stop by and make pickups. I liked Alisha. She was almost family—her older sister was Katy Bigelow, which made her Shawn’s sister-in-law.

“Tell her thanks from me,” Cap said. He put the box in his pocket.

“One more thing.” I led him around the passenger side of the truck. “Give me a hand here, would you?”

I jimmied a screwdriver into the panel over the broken lock. We wedged our fingers into the gap, lifted, and the top of the locker popped off like the lid of a Tupperware. Cap leaned it against the rear tire.

I fished in the opening with one arm and brought out a paper-wrapped package the size and shape of a bar of soap. “This is Doreen’s new prototype.”

“Is that so?” Cap looked wary.

“She swears up and down that she tested it,” I told him. “Gave me a whole batch to take to you.”

“What is it?” he asked.

“Luck.”

Cap quirked an eyebrow. “Luck?”

I looked around, then slapped my empty coat pockets. “You got a quarter?”

He found one in his wallet and handed it to me. I peeled back the wrapping on Doreen’s prototype, revealing a surface that gleamed like new plastic. “Drinks next Tuesday,” I told Cap. “Tails, I buy. Heads, you give me a sip of that voltage cocktail you’re sitting on.”

“All right.” He was looking curiously at the brick of luck. “Go on.”

I checked the faces of the quarter in the light from the bar windows, then rubbed the heads side against Doreen’s recipe. I met Cap’s eye, flipped the quarter, caught it, and slapped it against the back of my hand. Heads.

“Best of three,” Cap challenged.

I flicked the coin into the air again. It came up heads. I flipped it a third time, a fourth, time, a fifth time, catching a glitter of light from the neon sign—all heads. I tossed the quarter to Cap. He snatched it one handed and held it on his palm so I could see. It had landed heads side up.

Cap grinned at me over the charmed coin, and I felt myself grinning back. The first taste of a new magic is a heady feeling, like corn liquor on an empty stomach.

“Guess I owe you that voltage,” Cap said. “Better stick around a while afterward though. You can say goodbye to your friendly uncle if Ephraim catches you driving at a hundred-odd kilowatts of supernatural.”

“With lightning bolts shooting out of my fingers, if this stuff is as good as you say,” I said.

“It is,” Cap assured me. “Come on, let’s bring everything in. I’ll take Doreen’s whole batch.”

I locked up the truck and lugged Doreen's bag of bricks into the kitchen. The fry cook was flipping burgers on a tabletop-sized griddle, fan running full blast. Cap and I cut through the bar, skirting the crowd on the dance floor. The cover band had the bass turned up so loud I could see beer mugs vibrating across the tables. I covered one ear with my free hand and mashed the other into my shoulder.

The pool tables were quieter—a few people playing doubles, a few more sipping drinks along the walls, waiting their turn. We squeezed into the alcove where the pinball machine stood, flashing red and blue lights. Cap had bought them at a police surplus auction and I had wired them into place.

Cap pulled the curtain across the front of the alcove, hiding us from curious eyes. Without hitting start or putting a quarter into the pinball machine, he slapped the button for the right-hand flipper seven times: shave and a haircut, two bits. Cap had wanted there to be a secret pattern in Morse code. Really, you just had to hit the button a bunch of times in quick succession to get the circuit to connect.

I was proud of how I'd rigged the entrance. The front half of the machine, with its slot for quarters and its glassed-over game board, displaced outward slightly as the lock disengaged. Cap grabbed it and rolled it to one side, leaving the police flashers and the stylized word PINBALL arcing over a half-height doorway. Beyond it was a staircase leading down.

Cap ducked into the opening and I followed, pulling the pinball machine back into place. The stairs led down into a long, low basement shelves and weird sculptures whose heads scraped the ductwork on the ceiling. Glow-filled rubber tubing hung draped over pipes and shelves, checkering the gloom with unpredictable colors—I saw red, yellow, lime green, and the faint blue of my wild false indigo. In one corner a brazier was burning, silhouetting the group of



teenagers gathered around it. One of them reached over to a side table and dipped his hand into a Ziploc bag of animance. He blew on his fingers, like a gymnast getting rid of excess chalk, then flicked his hand at the brazier. The flames followed the motion, flowing away from him and snapping back.

On the far side of the brazier, two girls played pool without cues, directing the balls with precise motions of their animance-dusted fingers. There was a clack and then a clunk as a ball sank into the corner pocket. One of the players raised her hands in the air and whooped.

I pointed into a nook lit by normal fluorescent bulbs. “Dave Bramley’s stuff?” I asked Cap. A woman I recognized from the art store in Huntsville was drawing a monochrome forest scene on the wall, staining the white paint red wherever she touched it with her finger. Behind her, a pair in carnival-style padding were fencing with plastic swords. One of them scored a hit, and a blossom of red appeared on his opponent’s shoulder. It was too pink to look like blood.

“Yeah,” Cap answered. “The beets. I have some stockpiled from last year.”

“Is it popular?”

“Oh, sure. Though I do get complaints about red—toilet bowls. Now and then.”

I winced. “Please don’t tell me that’s the pipe issue you called me about.”

Cap laughed. “Better be nice to me, or it will be.”

We wended our way to the back, where a fountain in a wall niche sent water sheeting continuously over a smooth stone. Beside it was a dark wood door, which Cap unlocked with a key from his pocket. He went in ahead of me, switching on a desk light with a stained glass lampshade.

“You can put that anywhere,” Cap said, nodding at the bag in my hand.

I set it down on top of a corner table piled with single gloves and empty boxes. Cap's office was an unexpectedly cozy room, with a striped rug on the floor and a sagging couch where I sometimes spent the night. I perched on the desk, noticing for the first time that my jeans had worn away the wood finish over the years.

I looked the other way while Cap went to the wall safe. It was traditional for me to pretend I hadn't memorized the combination years ago. There was a glass-fronted cabinet on the other wall, full of odds and ends Cap had collected. There was a beer stein whose polished surface reflected the bar upstairs. If you leaned in close, you could see the spotlights, the cover band, and the writhing bodies on the dance floor. In the foreground, the bartender poured two shots of bourbon. The curve of the mug made the bar look like a boomerang.

I remembered Doreen making that mug, way back before the police cracked down on supernaturals. The brewers all came down to the Indigo on a Friday night, and Cap dared Doreen to do a brew right there in the bar. Happier times.

On the upper shelf was a dust magnet—handy invention of Dave Bramley's—left there to keep the cabinet tidy. Next to it stood a miniature ceramic horse. Cap had found it in a back-alley shop in Richmond. When he first got it, it galloped around so much he had to shut it in the cabinet, but it calmed down after a while.

"Hey, Cap," I said. "Throw that horse into the deal. Emma would love it."

"You sure?" he said. "It still moves around occasionally."

"Yeah," I said. "Hopefully it moves just often enough that Emma notices, but Shawn doesn't."

"Okay," Cap said. He turned, counting out bills. "Here."

I tucked the horse into my jacket pocket, then stretched out my hand for the cash. “That’s it?” I said, dismayed.

“That’s the usual for the cigarettes and some extra for the bricks,” said Cap. He pushed the money into my hand. “I can’t give you that much for a prototype that might blow up on me. You remember the spark darts?”

“That was not my fault!” I straightened up and pointed at him accusingly. “You picked those up from some trash dealer in Richmond. I had nothing to do with it.”

Cap grinned. “As I remember, it was your through that made the crater in the wall.”

“How was I supposed to know I was holding a dynamite cap?” I retorted. “You told me I’d get a cute little firework if I hit the bulls-eye.”

“Would’ve been fine if you were a crap darts player like the rest of us, but no, you went ahead and nailed that board dead center—” He was laughing. “And then the atomic bomb went off in my bar.”

“I said I’d hit it,” I told him. “You better believe me next time.”

“Oh, I won’t ever doubt you again.” Cap sobered. “Sorry, Molly, but that really is the best I can pay for backcountry supernaturals. I’ve got a budget. I threw in a little extra for the glow, if that helps.”

“Pity doesn’t help,” I said flatly.

“Well, what do you want me to do?” He raked his fingers through his hair, making it stand on end. “Most of the real stuff comes out of the cities these days. I can sell Dave and Doreen’s stuff for local color, but nobody’s going to buy corn liquor when there’s whiskey on offer.”

I crossed my arms. “You’re cutting me out, just so you can buy more crummy glow from Richmond.”

“It’s not just glow!” Cap swung his hands, frustrated that he wasn’t getting through to me. “Yes, they’ve got good prices on the commodity stuff like animance and glow, but they’re *inventing* things, Molly. They’ve got new supernaturals that I’ve never seen before—crazy stuff that fires people up.”

“Like spark darts, for example?”

“There’s more out there than exploding darts!” Cap burst out. “I’ve heard about psychics, telekinesis, controlled flight. They’re getting closer and closer to invisibility.” He said it again, jabbing his finger down at the desk. “*Invisibility*. Can you imagine what that would mean? We could hide anything, smuggle anything anywhere—” He threw up his hands. “And here I am in the sticks, selling the same worn-out stuff year after year.”

“I just gave you something brand new,” I pointed out. “When have you ever seen brick luck before?”

“So Doreen comes out with something new once a decade.” Cap shrugged. “I’ll get old while I’m waiting. If things drag on like this, I’m selling up and moving to Richmond.”

I froze. Slowly, I turned around and looked him in the eye. “You’re not serious.”

“Yeah, Molly, I am!” He was mad now. “This business gets riskier every year. Every week I hear about a raid—the cops were in Huntsville earlier tonight. One day, Ephraim’s going to search you and you’re going to get caught. And then what? Prison? How is that worth it for a couple thousand dollars of homebrewed luck?”

“You’re selling out on me,” I said quietly.

Cap held my gaze. “It doesn’t have to be like that.”

I laughed mockingly. “Oh, you think I should come with you? I should walk out on my friends and leave home so a bunch of corporate Richmond snobs can call me a loser?”

“At least think about it,” he said.

“No, I don’t think I will!” I blazed. “You want to go sell cheap watered-down legalized goods, you go ahead. I’ll find another buyer.”

“Yeah?” Cap said. “Who? There *is* no other buyer.”

“There will be, after you clear out.” I stuffed the cash into my pocket, making the pottery horse squirm. “So get going.”

There was a cheer outside the door, probably from one of the pool players. Cap rubbed his hand over his eyes. “Look, we don’t have to argue about this right now,” he said. “Why don’t we go upstairs and have that drink? Voltage, beer, your choice.”

“I’ll pass,” I said coldly. I pushed myself up from the desk. “I’m going to drive out to Doreen’s, give her her cut. I’ll see you.”

It had started to rain, a mist that left a million fine droplets on the hood of the truck. The windshield wipers wouldn’t work. I switched on my high beams and squinted through the streaky glass at the trees on the roadside, watching for the turnoff for Doreen’s cabin. It popped up without warning and I swung the wheel around, fishtailing onto the muddy track. The gate was shut. I climbed out of the truck, shoulders hunched against the drizzle, dragged the gate open and wedged it behind a chunk of dead wood in the underbrush.

Doreen’s house was built into the side of a hill, with its back wall against the rock and its porch up on stilts. The outside light flipped on as I ground to a halt next to her parked VW bus.

Doreen stepped out onto the porch. “Fix your muffler, Molly,” she yelled into the dark. “The cops can hear you in Richmond.”

I got out of the truck and climbed the porch steps. Doreen was wearing a bandana that bound her curly hair into a triangle. “Hello to you too,” I said. “Don’t smother me with so much hospitality.”

She laughed and gave me a hug. “Come on in. Try not to notice the mess.”

I followed her into the kitchen, which was stacked with piles of boxes and screw-top jars like extra architecture buttressing the walls. In a corner near the fogged-up window, a blue-crested bird clung to the side bars of his cage. He turned his head to eye me, hanging at a forty-five-degree angle to the floor. The cowlicked feathers on top of his head made him look disconcertingly like Cap.

“What’s this?” I said, hovering my hand above a covered pot on the rear burner. “Do I dare look?”

“That’s dinner.” Doreen lifted the lid, sending a curl of steam toward the hood of the stove. Bubbles expanded and popped between simmering kidney beans. “The risky stuff is over there.” Doreen pointed to a gas-fired camp stove set up on the kitchen table. An enormous double boiler with rivets the size of my thumbnails sat on top of the cooking surface.

“Looks serious.” I approached the table, noting the oily scorch mark on the bottom of the boiler. “So this is where the sausage gets made?”

“If by ‘sausage’ you mean little magic soap cakes.” Doreen donned a thick rubber oven mitt with a burn mark on the palm. “This batch is almost done. Want to see?”

“Long as I don’t get hit by the backsplash,” I said. “I’d rather not find out what it would mean for my head to get lucky.”

Doreen considered. “Probably nothing,” she said. “Or no—next time a bird flies over, you’d get pooped on for sure.”

She lifted the lid of the boiler and I peered cautiously over the rim, keeping my hands well back from the stove. “Ugh, that reeks,” I said. It was like standing over the barrel while I burned the trash behind the cabin.

“Yeah,” Doreen said. “We both just got an extra helping of cancer.”

The smoke dissipated and I saw a blackened, shiny substance clinging to the bottom of the boiler like burned dumplings stuck to a pan. Doreen reached in with a pair of barbecue tongs and detached a lump from the mass. She set it down on a cutting board, leaving a sooty smear.

“Did you overcook it?” I asked. “The stuff I took to Cap’s looked so clean.”

“Shh.” Doreen lifted a meat tenderizer and whacked the charcoal lump once, twice, three times. The lump skittered sideways, still intact. Doreen grabbed it.

“This’s a tough one,” she said. “One sec.”

She reached under the table and brought out a two-foot sledgehammer with a rusting head. I winced. “Are you sure about—”

“No worries.” Doreen smashed the hammer down on the lump of charcoal, sending chips flying in all directions. She stripped off the oven mitt and picked up her concoction bare-handed. I hissed in sympathy.

She glanced at me. “Oh, it’s not hot,” she said. “It’s like baking paper. Doesn’t hold much heat.”

She dug her thumbs into a crack in the black lump, peeling back the hard, burnt rind. Underneath, it was pristine white. I raised my eyebrows as Doreen exposed perfectly square corners.

“I know you’re not supposed to ask what’s in your sausage,” I said, “but I have to admit I’m curious.”

“Easy answer,” Doreen said. “Cards.”

“Cards?”

“Playing cards. A few other things too, but that’s the main ingredient. Look, you can still see the design.” She flipped the white brick over and I noticed a blue stain, crosshatched like the pattern on a cheap deck of cards.

“How do you come up with this stuff, anyway?” I asked. “Do you just go ‘I’m feeling lucky today’ and throw some cards in the boiler?”

“Oh no, nothing that deliberate,” Doreen said. “Usually I just mix and match and see what reacts. You never know when the right ingredients will come together. This time it was playing cards, and pink lemonade, and—” She checked herself. “Never mind.”

I laughed. “I’m no brewer, Doreen. I’m not going to steal your recipes.”

She shrugged and put the lid back on the boiler. “Can’t hurt to be careful. In case, you know, I figure out prophecy someday. Or invisibility.”

I grinned. “When you have those recipes, I better be the one you call.”

I watched her polish the corners of the brick with her thumb. “Isn’t it risky handling that with bare skin?”

“Not really.” Doreen dumped the brick into a big steel bowl. “It has some handy side effects. I hadn’t seen Henry’s pompom toy in days, but then I reached behind the bookcase to pick up a spoon I’d dropped, and there it was.” She gestured to the bird in the corner. He had a string of pompoms in his beak, and he was jerking it his head back and forth, flailing the pompoms across the floor of his cage.



“Anyway,” I said, averting my gaze from Henry, “I came to bring you your share from the first round of luck bricks.” I took out Cap’s stack of bills, did some division in my head, and split it into two piles.

“That’s a lot of money to be carrying around,” Doreen commented. “I’d think you’d be more careful, now that Alisha got busted.”

I fumbled the cash. It fluttered to the floor, twenties settling amid the flakes of soot from Doreen’s brick. “Alisha got caught?”

Doreen looked at me strangely. “You didn’t hear? It just happened tonight. I got a call.” She pointed to her ancient cordless phone, balanced on a cardboard box near the microwave.

Cap had mentioned a raid near Huntsville. I hadn’t made the connection. “I must have been on the road,” I said. I knelt and clumsily gathered up the bills. My fingers were numb.

“She puts a little animance into the cigarettes,” Doreen said. “Her dealer ratted her out. Possession’s not as bad as manufacture, but she still might get jail time.”

“What?” Suddenly I was on my feet. “Sorry, what?”

Doreen’s eyes widened at the expression on my face. “Jail time,” she repeated, shifting so that the barbecue tongs were between us. “Two years tops. I was sentenced to five years when I was in my twenties—got paroled after eighteen months.”

Alisha was no hard-bitten lifer like Doreen. She was barely twenty, with an older sister and a brother-in-law who would panic when they heard. “I have to go,” I said brusquely. I headed for the door.

“You can’t go to Alisha’s.” Doreen got in front of me, barring the door. For a second we stood toe to toe. She met my eye and flinched. “Might as well turn yourself in,” she said.

“There’ll be cops there waiting to see who crawls out of the hills.”

“It’ll be fine,” I said. I manufactured a reassuring smile. “Alisha’s practically my family. I’ll say I was just visiting on the way to my brother’s.”

“In the middle of the night?” Doreen said.

I lost patience. “I don’t care what time it is, Doreen, I’m going and I’m going now.”

Doreen hesitated. She was taller, but I was more solidly built. “You’re being an idiot, Molly,” she told me. She stepped away from the door. I was out of there before she could say anything else.

By the time I got to Huntsville it was raining hard, hammering on the windshield and roof. I screamed down the road, gas pedal to the floorboards, then saw the red and blue lights flashing in front of Alisha’s apartment building and instinctively slammed the brake. The truck slewed sideways and I pumped the brake frantically, trying to unlock the wheels. A dim shape loomed on the side of the road.

The tires bit into the muddy shoulder and I lurched to a standstill three scant feet from a familiar minivan, parked beside the chain link fence.

The van’s driver’s door burst open and a man rushed toward me through the rain, arms waving. I rolled my window down and braced myself, both hands wrapped around the bottom of the steering wheel.

“What do you think you’re doing?” He thrust his face right through my window, knuckles white on the sides of the window frame. “Playing NASCAR driver on a residential street? You trying to hit someb—*Molly?*”

“Hello, Shawn,” I said, looking straight ahead.

He stared at me, wet hair plastered to his forehead. “What are you doing here?”

“I heard about Alisha,” I said. “Came as soon as I could. Why are you here in the middle of the night? Where are the kids?”

“With the neighbors. We’ve been here for hours—Katy’s trying to get on the phone with a lawyer—” He was looking at me with growing suspicion. “How did you find out what happened?”

“I heard about it from a—” I couldn’t think straight. My mind was racing. “From a friend.” That was the wrong thing to say.

“A friend,” Shawn repeated, voice rising ominously. “A friend who keeps close tabs on the police, huh? Maybe does a few business deals on the side?”

“That’s not—” I began.

“Don’t even try to finish that,” Shawn said tightly. “Do you know what this night has been like? We were in the middle of dinner when the phone rang and Alisha said she was being *arrested*. They’d given her one phone call and she wanted to let us know they were going to lock up her apartment and put her in a holding cell overnight. Katy was frantic, we dropped the kids off and left right away—” I noticed for the first time that he was wearing pajama bottoms and flip-flops, no jacket, no hat. Rain dripped off his stubble and splotted the door panels.

“They found animance in the apartment. Alisha won’t say one way or the other if she knew about it. Katy’s been asking all sorts of questions about warrants and bail and lawyers, and now you’re here, screeching off the road like a criminal at the sight of the police—”

From him, that stung. “I am not hiding from the police,” I snapped. “I work a decent job.”

“Let’s stop pretending I’m stupid,” Shawn snapped. “You’re in it neck deep. You’re practically the poster child for the supernaturals crisis in rural Virginia.”

“And so what if I am?”

“This is it, Mags, this is the last straw. I’ve tried to live and let live, have you over for dinner, send the girls to visit on weekends. But I never want to get that phone call Katy just got, you understand? Never.”

I bit my lip. Shawn saw me hesitate and took advantage. “You have work. You could set up in town and get your electrician’s license. You don’t need to go driving all over the hills for whatever kind of daredevil street cred—”

“I’m not a daredevil,” I said coldly.

“You’re doing the kind of stuff we did for thrills when we were kids.” The back of Shawn’s hand cracked against the wing mirror as he gestured. “Everyone has a couple wild years, but they grow out of it. You’re almost thirty, for heaven’s sake. Get yourself some health insurance. Ask Cap out sometime.”

“I’m not in this for the thrill.” I shoved open the door, making Shawn step back in surprise. The rain pounded my shoulders as I got out of the truck. “I am not some teenager pulling a stupid attention-getting stunt. What is it with you people? When did supernaturals become so speak-in-whispers evil that Katy’s little sister is somehow corrupt for buying a little bit of animance? Why do they have to be either a cardinal sin or a, a business deal?”

I didn’t know where the words were coming from. “I never criticize your life. You seem like you’re happy being all wrapped up in insurance and cotton wool. But the nerve of you, telling me to sell out and climb into your straitjacket—that would be far, far, far worse than two years in jail for possession of animance.” I was shouting now, fists balled up in my pockets. “You of all people should know! I don’t understand how you can box yourself up in that town when you’ve been up in the hills and seen flowers that glow. I—” I’d run out of things to say. Shawn and I glared at each other, chests heaving.

“Now I’m going over there to talk to Alisha,” I said. “And to tell her sister to shut up, if necessary.”

“No.” Shawn grabbed on to my forearm. “Leave them alone. This is hard enough for both of them without you making it worse.”

“Let go of me.” I wrenched at my arm, but he held on with both hands. I dug my fingers in under his, but then Shawn’s face passed through the truck’s headlights, jaw clenched, eyes red, and I stopped.

I didn’t have the heart for this. I let out a long breath, feeling my shoulders slump.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll go home. You take this, though.” I reached into the cab and got the jar of animal crackers. “Tell Emma I’m saving her real present for later.”

Unexpectedly, Shawn pulled me into a fierce hug. Water squelched between us and we laughed weakly at the sound.

“I still think you’re crazy,” he said. “But good on you for choosing your own life, Mags. Make it count.”

I gave him a half smile; the full one wouldn’t come. “You take care of yourself,” I said. He waved as I drove away.

The truck barreled ahead into a funnel of rain. Waves of it streamed over the useless wipers and rippled across the windshield. I held the gas pedal hard to the floor, listening to the swish of water against the undercarriage.

You chose your own life. Make it count. High sounding words to throw up against the facts of gas prices eating up my cash, Cap selling out and heading for Richmond, policemen flashing their lights in front of Alisha’s apartment building. I was going to live in my shack until

I ended up like Doreen, tough as old leather and alone with a deranged bird. But Doreen had her boiler and her recipes. She could make magic.

The tires spat gravel as I turned onto the road to my cabin. I almost wished Ephraim was there to blip his siren and pull me over. “You ever heard of a thing called a law, Molly?” he would say. “Maybe consider following one?” Getting arrested would be a tidy ending to all this. I was probably still juiced from the smoke at Doreen’s. But Ephraim was home with Susan, probably fast asleep.

A pebble clacked off the side of the truck. I steered around the last switchback and let the truck roll to a stop in front of the cabin. Automatically, I pulled the lever for the parking brake, got out, and slammed the driver’s door. A fat drop fell from the trees onto my cheek. I hadn’t noticed when the rain stopped.

A mist was condensing close to the ground, weaving between the tree trunks. Farther up the hill, I could see the glimmer of Cap’s flowers, a lake of faint indigo light. The moon showed through a thinning layer of clouds. I walked around the truck to unload the gas cans. As I unlatched the tailgate, the back of my hand brushed across the water droplets that dewed the surface of the truck. It was an unexpectedly greasy feeling, like oil or warm honey. I frowned and looked more closely at my hand.

It wasn’t there.

I mean my hand wasn’t there—where the smear of water should have been, there was only a black empty hole. I held up my hand and looked straight through it at the fog clinging to the evergreens.

Instinctively, I scrubbed my knuckles on my jeans. The water wiped off, to my relief, and my hand slipped back into existence. But now there was a transparent streak on my leg. I looked down at my thigh and saw the rocks jutting out of the driveway behind me.

Heart pounding, I ran my hands along the tailgate and gathered a pool of liquid in my palms. It was thick and viscous, black as the paint on my truck. I took two steps to my right and threw it against a hemlock tree.

A piece vanished out of the trunk as neatly as if I'd cut it away with a chainsaw. When I reached out to put my fingers into the gap, I met solid bark, wet from the rain. The tree was still there—I just couldn't see it.

What had Doreen said? You never know when the right elements will come together. Driving fast, driving blind, the dark and the pelting rain, and—I looked up at the sky—maybe a little touch of moonshine; that was what it took. This stuff stuck to my palms was the raw material of invisibility.

I raised my fists above my head, like I'd just beaten Cap at darts, like I'd ruled the pool game at the Indigo. "Look!" I hollered at the dappled moon. "It's magic!"

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## **ACADEMIC VITA**

### **Education**

Penn State University, Schreyer Honors College, Aug 2016-Dec 2020

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