



K. W. HILES

# LITTLE WONDERS

*A Novella*

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by

K. W. Hiles

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*For Nate, and all the little wonders yet to come . . .*

# CHAPTER 1

## JESSIE ALONE

*“And the queen stood in silence, pondering the slow fall of leaves from the dying oak. The land that had never known winter grew pale and silent under a cutting wind. The queen watched and waited for a summer that would never return. And she felt so terribly alone.” –A Fall of Stardust*

Though she was born Kathleen, she preferred to be called by her middle name, Jessie. Kathleen never felt right and Kathy even less so. It was Jessie, she had told her parents at the ripe old age of three. And so, Jessie it remained.

Jessie stood in the breakfast nook staring out the window, dinner plate forgotten in her hand, her thoughts spiraling helplessly around a yawning darkness. She hated this ugly place. She hated her new school. She had no friends. Classmates called her “loser” and “freak.” She had never felt so alone; an alien stranded on a cold, barren planet.

She had ways of escaping her fears, of coping, but they came with a bitter price. Jessie was an effortless daydreamer, which did not endear her to her teachers or help with her falling grades. She may have been locked away at school, but her mind had no such limitations. Jessie’s mind was the key to worlds and

adventures faraway.

Most of her fantasies were inspired by a series of fantasy books she had discovered in a used bookstore a few years ago. They were about a wise and beautiful faerie queen who ruled a kingdom in a beautiful fantasy world. These books, by a writer named Larry Boswell, were her most treasured stories in the whole world. Though there were only five of them and the last one, *A Fall of Stardust*, was written over 15 years ago, she had re-read them at least a half-dozen times. She wondered why Larry Boswell stopped writing. *What happened to him? Did he die?* And that thought made her treasure the book even more.

When not fantasizing about her kingdom, she would draw pictures of beautiful landscapes and magical creatures, or write her own stories about dancing faeries and majestic castles. She often gazed out the window during class, catching sight of birds flitting past. She would close her eyes, her imagination reaching out with tenuous fingers until she was a bird, soaring high through the warming air. She would soar, pinwheeling into the sky, and peer down at all the unsuspecting people crawling beneath her wings. *Careful! This little bird had a full meal!*

Jessie was incredibly bright, her teachers knew this, and it made everything that much more frustrating for them. They tried talking to her about paying attention. They sent letters to her parents—and Jessie suffered from the lectures that followed. To Jessie, it all became endless noise, and the only way to avoid it,

to clear her mind of it, was to get away. Mentally, if not physically. Winging through cloud cathedrals and darting through columns of golden sunlight was much more real than studying dry, old school books. Soon, her exasperated teachers began to scold her, to single her out for parent-teacher conferences. Time and time again, Jessie would sit silently between her parents, who smiled thinly and nodded in embarrassment, during these after school meetings. Her parents assumed she was simply being irresponsible or, more commonly, lazy. They also knew how smart she was and were at a complete loss. She wasn't trying hard enough! They would shrug at the counselor and offer such nuggets of parental wisdom as, "She will do better! We're right on it!"

Still, the daydreams and flights of wonder continued, much to the consternation of everyone but Jessie.

And then, finally, it came down to mandatory sessions with the school's behavioral specialist, whose thin-lipped smile seemed badly practiced, whose concern oozed out like refrigerator air, and who seemed like she'd rather be doing her nails than sitting in an office talking with such a waste of space.

A few minutes is all it took; the specialist had already ticked off her mental checklist. *Yes. Yes. Yes. Jessie had all the right symptoms. Jessie, poor girl, had a mental disorder. Yes. Yes. Glad we caught it now, before it . . .*

The specialist tried talking her parents into putting her on some kind of medication. For her "ADHD." But much to Jessie's surprise, her parents backed

away from such recommendations. And then, Jessie realized the sorry truth behind their response: *"What would the neighbors think?"*

From the time she woke up until the time she went to bed, life was a series of awkward silences, angry glances, and chaotic, inarticulate feelings. More and more, it took all of her strength to wake up and get out of bed. Glancing in the mirror, she'd tried to find answers in her own reflection, only to find a stranger's face looking back at her. It was the eyes. She didn't recognize them anymore. They were once so lively. Like ocean emeralds, her dad used to say. But not anymore. They were dull stones, faded and dim. And they were hard to look into--always accusing, as if she'd betrayed them. "What's wrong with me?" she would ask. But the reflection had no answers.

She would try to talk with her parents, tell them that she was scared and confused, but they didn't seem to want to hear about it.

"You are not trying hard enough, Jessie," they would say. "Make some friends. You will feel better. And then you will do better."

Make some friends . . . Jessie tried but it was difficult. The other kids laughed at her clothes—they weren't trendy or stylish: "You're 13 years old," her mom would say. "Not 13 going on 20! What's so wrong about your clothes, anyway?"

She wasn't cool. She sometimes stuttered when she was nervous. But the

biggest strike against her was that she didn't even own a smartphone. She barely knew what social media was, and she had no clue about texting, sharing photos and videos.

Jessie tried to explain to her parents: "All the kids in my school have iPhones or iPads or Android phones. They have laptops. They're on the internet. They have gaming consoles."

Jessie couldn't understand why her parents were so out of touch with everything. She could hear their argument echoing in her head; the same words every time: "You don't need to be wasting your time on games and browsing the internet. They're not good for you. You're a kid and you need to be out in the fresh air, riding your bike, running around, and staying active. All you want to do is stay inside and read books."

Jessie tried to convince them that having a phone would be great for emergencies. "You're too young," her dad would say. "You don't need to have a cell phone."

"When you're a little older," her mom would add, looking at her husband.

"Can I at least get a laptop? It would help with homework."

"You've always gotten your homework done just fine without a laptop. Like your mom said, maybe when you're older."

It's not like Jessie didn't try to make friends at school but she had two major obstacles in her way. She was extremely shy. A startled deer-like shy. She never knew what to say, and when she tried, her words would sometimes come out all tumbled and twisted.

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A group of girls were huddled together outside the student union, some were busy staring at their phones and others were laughing—this laughter wasn't the good, happy, sort of laughter. There was too much mockery and spite threading through it. One red-haired girl, named Rita, looked up and, much to her surprise, smiled. She even waved Jessie over. Jessie mustered up all her courage and approached the girls. Jessie had seen them often, hanging out together, shouting out at passing students, giggling, making faces, but their main activity seemed to be texting on their phones. Jessie had always made it a priority to stay clear. There was no need to invite more trouble.

"Uh . . . hi!" she said, her eyes wide with uncertainty. "Umm . . . I'm Je-Je-Jess—" She groaned internally. *Damn stutter! Talk slower!*

"Umm? Who asked you, Je-Je-Je?" Rita said.

"You waved at me."

Rita snickered. "You must have imagined it."

That's when they all looked up from their phones and began to giggle.

And then it started.

*"Didn't you wear that outfit yesterday? Where do you shop? Goodwill?"*

Lots of laughter.

*"Trailer trash!"*

*"Them loser boys down at Atascocita Mobile Park are gonna love you!"*

*"Naw, even they have better taste!"*

Jessie could feel her cheeks reddening. "I, I, I don't live in a—

"Don't you ever change your clothes?" More chattering and laughing, like a flock of colorful, cruel birds.

Rita held up her phone and snapped a picture. "You're such a dork!" She grabbed the book Jessie was carrying and held it up. "It's a kid's book about fairies! You like fairies? You believe in fairies?"

Jessie felt a bolt of deep anger rise up, she reached out for the book, yelling and pleading, "Give it back! Give it back now!"

The girls surrounded her like hungry vultures, smelling blood. Rita threw the book to another girl. Soon the girls were tossing it back and forth, cheering: "Freak! Freak!"

Jessie wanted to run. Her face burned. Her eyes watered. "Leave me alone!" she said. "I'm not a freak!"

"Freak! Freak!" they chanted.

The red-haired girl turned to her friends and grinned. "I heard she has a retard brother!"

"Retard's sister! Retard's sister!"

Jessie's anger grew like wildfire, rising up through her body. Her hands became fists. She trembled. "He's not a retard! You don't know anything! He's not a retard! He's autistic!"

Rita and her friends drew closer, laughing, snapping pictures with their phones.

And then Jessie felt the anger leak away. She hadn't expected that. It simply began to flood out of her, making her feel small. Dwindling into nothing. A void. A flickering candle blown out to emptiness. She didn't even exist . . . .

*What is wrong with me?*

There was no place on earth for her. No place safe. There was no one who cared. No one to talk with.

And then the taunting girls fell silent as a voice interrupted them. A woman's voice. Not loud. Calm. Strong. Reassuring. Everything stopped. Became still. As if there was nothing else in the world except for this voice.

"She is not a freak. Give her the book."

*The woman is beautiful, was Jessie's first thought. No, not just beautiful . . . but proud and strong.*

The woman wore a flowing summer dress, which reminded Jessie of a dark blue sky after the sun had set, and around her waist was a fine linked belt of gold and silver. She didn't look like a parent or a teacher.

The woman approached the group, her long blonde hair framing a pale, ageless face with intense green eyes. The girls looked at one another, the light of panic or alarm rising in their eyes, and yet they didn't run away. They seemed

frozen. The woman stopped and looked at each of the girls intently. No one could match her gaze. They all looked away. Or they stared down at the ground, hugging their books.

She spoke again, her voice tinged with sadness. "Can you not see her? Can you not see yourselves? Where is all this hatred coming from? Where is all this fear coming from?"

One dark-haired girl spoke up, her eyes darting to the woman, she held out the book and Jessie snatched it away. "Come on, Rita, let's go!"

Rita began shaking her head. Took a step forward. At first she seemed to hesitate but a quick glance at her friends, who were all silently begging her to stop, made her press on. Rita slowly met the woman's eyes. "Who's scared? I'm not scared." She gave Jessie an icy glare. "She's the one who's afraid. She's the freak!"

The woman's face softened. "You of all should know better. We all fear what we do not understand. We all fear things that are different. And then we lash out. We push away that which makes us feel uncomfortable. We need to make these uncomfortable things feel small to make us feel bigger. What has happened to you? You need to go home."

Rita bit her lip. She took a deep breath and let it out in a rush. "This is so boring," she said. She nodded quickly at the girls. "You're not a teacher and you

can't make us do anything."

"It's okay, ma'am," Jessie said. "It's nothing. I'm fine."

The woman smiled. "You are a good person, Jessie." She held up her hands, palms facing the girls, her long fingers pointed toward the sky. "One last thing."

The girls took a step back, but Rita moved closer and lifted her phone. "I'm taking your picture! I'm gonna make you go viral! You're gonna be in so much—"

The woman bowed her head. "Remember who you really are," she said, now in a commanding voice. "Look past your own illusions! See the truth of things!"

The red-haired girl's eyes widened, her mouth falling open, her hands coming up to her face. The other girls all seemed to sag from within. And they all began to weep; a deep and hurtful weeping. One by one they fled, hunched over, stumbling, and running blindly with tear-clouded eyes.

All except for Rita. Her hands came away from her face and her eyes burned with a mixture of fear and anger. She stood defiant, her hands balled at her sides.

"Leave me alone," she said slowly through clenched teeth. "You shouldn't be here! You can't save her! She's not the one!" She backed away, pointing at the woman with a shaking finger.

The woman held out her hands, almost as if pleading. “You have done enough. You do not have to do this anymore. It is time to go back.”

“Stay away from me! I’m not finished with her!” And then Rita turned and fled from the schoolyard.

Jessie stared at the retreating red-haired girl. “What was that all about? What did you . . . what did you do?”

The woman reached out and lightly touched Jessie’s shoulder. There was an immediate spark, like static electricity, and Jessie felt warmth spread through her body. “The illusion was broken,” she said. “They saw the ugliness and the fear and the loss clouding their hearts.”

“Who are you?” Jessie stared at those deep forest green eyes. For a moment she was elsewhere, somewhere cool and shaded and . . . she tried to put a word to the feeling and all she could think of was home.

“Follow your heart, Jessie. Always follow your heart. Who knows where it will lead to. If you are ever afraid or lonely, just say these words: ‘My breath and my heart are one. My breath and my soul are one. I am one. I am one.’” The woman turned and began walking away.

“Wait!” Jessie called out. “What’s your name? Who are you?”

Over her shoulder, the woman answered: "I am your friend. I will always be your friend."

Jessie watched as the woman headed toward the tree-lined playground. She passed a large shaded oak, the tree's shadow wrapping around her, and then she was gone. In a blink. Like she was never there.

Jessie stood there for a long moment, feeling as if the world had shifted slightly. She hugged herself. *How did she know my name?*

She heard the woman's words again, "I am your friend. I will always be your friend."

Jessie began to cry.

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She never told her parents about the woman. It was her secret. Her comfort. Besides, they'd only make those familiar concerned faces and ask too many questions that had no simple answers. Maybe they'd even report the whole thing to the school. Jessie wished with all her heart she could share what happened. The sheer wonder of it. But she knew they wouldn't understand.

As she set the breakfast nook for dinner, Jessie felt some of the old

heaviness, some of the familiar darkness return to hover over her like brooding storm clouds. Since the incident with the woman, the bullying from the girls had stopped, at least to her face. Mostly when they saw Jessie, they simply moved away, their heads hung low. She wondered if it were better to be ignored. It didn't feel any better though. And life at home? Same as it ever was.

And Rita hadn't been around at all. Jessie had a moment of hope: *Maybe she moved away?*

Mom and dad were arguing again. Their voices, from the living room, were muffled but she could make out some of the words: *"It's my job, Susan!" "Moving to Texas?" "What can we do?" "No I don't think she's old enough for a damn phone!"*

When her parents argued, Jessie usually resigned herself to a single thought: *It's my fault*. But was it? This questioning was something new, but then again, maybe it was her fault. *Stop it*, she told herself. *You're always doing that. Blaming yourself for everything. Everything is not your fault!*

She thought about her younger brother; he always seemed so happy. So unaffected by anything. Why couldn't she be more like Bobby?

"Hiya, Jessie!" Bobby said as he came bounding into the kitchen.

Bobby was autistic and, as far as Jessie understood, it made him very

special. He was only four and so full of energy and life and unconditional love for everyone. The world was always so new for him, so full of delightful curiosity. *I wish I were more like him*, she thought. *I wish things didn't tug and rip away at my insides all the time*. And her parents, they were so different around Bobby. No arguing. No recriminations. No disappointments.

Another familiar thought: *Am I really their daughter? Was I adopted? Maybe if I disappeared, everyone would be happy.*

"Hey, Bobby! How was pre-school today?"

"We made lil' fairies," he said, clapping his hands.

"Sounds like you had lots of fun." She tried to give him a big smile but then he laughed and ran down the hallway, his mind already jumping at something more exciting. And probably more interesting than a silly ol' sister.

Jessie's mom came back into the kitchen, her face flushed. She frowned at the table. "Didn't you forget something Jessie? The napkins?" her mother said. "Snap out of it, Jessie! Half the time you're not even here. Where do you go?"

She was starting to feel this awful pit grow in her stomach. *Do other people feel this yucky inside*, Jessie wondered. *Other kids were out playing in the street, riding their bicycles, laughing*. They were right outside, she could see them through the window, but they seemed a million miles away. And they scared her.

They would say stuff as she walked by them, so she took to avoiding them altogether. Jessie would take the long way around, or a different way, so she wouldn't have to pass them and run their gauntlet of taunts.

*This neighborhood, she thought, is ugly. Sad.* There were barely any trees at all, and those she saw were small and spindly. Even they seemed to have trouble growing in this place. And the town wasn't any better. It was mostly rundown buildings, endless strip malls selling cheap shoes or promising a newer, fitter body, fast food restaurants, streets full of buses and trucks roaring by, and everything suffocating with exhaust fumes and sour smoke from the nearby paper mill. A world full of cold, meaningless, empty things. And it broke Jessie's heart.

Dinner was ready and everyone came to the table.

"How was school today?" Her dad said, his mouth full of mashed potatoes.

"Fine," she said, trying to smile. It felt make-believe. A false mask stretched tight across her face. She wanted to scream that she hated school with every ounce of her being. She wanted to tell them about the old bus with the hard, torn seats, and the driver who had small cold eyes, and all those screaming, pushy kids who always placed their hands on the empty spaces beside them, telling her "Saved!" with a sneer. Most days she rode at the back of the bus, scrunched up tight against a dirty window.

But instead, she repeated, "Fine."

His eyebrows went up as if he could sense the lie, and she wondered if anyone else ever had people look at them in that way? Or is it only me?

“Yeah? Just fine? What did you do today?” That tone and look again.

What could she say? She had a wonderful, fantastic test in math? Or that she had a super special, exciting game of kickball in gym class? Instead, Jessie looked down at the table and shrugged.

“Your mom and I met another couple, the Liggins, and they have a little girl just your age. We invited them over tomorrow night and you can play with their girl.

“What's her name?” her dad asked, his eyes rolling upwards. “Hon, do you remember?”

“Rita,” Jessie's mom said.

*Rita?*

Jessie felt her stomach twist into a knot. *Rita from school? That Rita? She hadn't moved away afterall. Nonononono!* She looked around the table with panicked eyes, her hands gripping the table's edge. Everyone else was talking about their day. They were laughing at Bobby, who was being goofy, but Jessie

didn't hear a word. She wanted to scream, to jump up and bolt from the room. To leave behind this house, this town, this world of sharp angles and jagged edges.

She searched inside herself for the safe place, that sanctuary of dreams and safety, her Kingdom of Warmth and Brightness, it wasn't always there--and those were the worst times--but she found it now. A comforting stillness. A gentle silence that made all the talk, the noise, the fear and sadness dwindle away. In this Kingdom, Jessie was queen. Loved. Respected. Feared by her enemies. In this Kingdom everyone at the table catered to her every need. Her mother, her father, and her little brother were happy to be of service. Not that she was a tyrant—she ruled with fairness and compassion—and those she ruled were grateful for her benevolence.

“Can I get you anything?” they would ask.

“Would you like more sweet cake my queen?”

“School was horrible, you say? Well, we will go there tomorrow and straighten it all out. All those who hurt you will be cast into the darkest, deepest dungeon.”

“You wish to be alone? Then we will not disturb our beloved daughter and queen. We know you need your rest. We will send everyone away.”

With regal authority, unwavering confidence, and absolute control—if only

in this dream—Jessie was able to finish her dinner.

# CHAPTER 2

## JESSIE AND HER NEMESIS

*“Against the fall of night, with the coming of cruel winter, the queen gathered her people and offered the only thing she had left to give. Her wounded heart. Even now the snarling horde of Red Caps flowed like a devouring tide out of the northern mountains and across the shadow-wilted fields.” –A Fall of Stardust*

Friday night. Jessie was petrified. The Liggins were coming over for dinner and Jessie would have to be alone with Rita. How could her parents do this? Jessie sat on her bed, stared at the window, imagining Rita and her family walking up the driveway. She imagined the girl’s sneer. Her hard, dark eyes full of disgust.

*Maybe she learned her lesson from the other day, she thought. Maybe she’s changed. Maybe we can be friends.* Jessie squeezed her eyes shut, her hands balling up her bedspread. A moment of hope sparked in her only to be blown away by a wind of despair. It would never happen. Jessie wanted to crawl into a hole and never come out.

“Jessie, they will be here any minute! Come down here!” her mother shouted.

“Okay, mom!” She tried to be cheerful but it sounded hollow. She was not feeling cheerful at all. She was mad. She was sad. She was scared.

She combed her long dark hair, avoiding those hopeless eyes in the mirror, and walked slowly down the stairs. It was the walk of a condemned prisoner. Her mother had her good china on the table. Bobby was being his usual self, running all around the house, singing to himself. Dad was sitting in his favorite chair, reading the newspaper. Mom was hovering near him, wiping her hands on a dish towel. She heard them talking quietly.

“This will be good for her,” her mom said. “She needs to make some friends. I don’t know what’s wrong with her. It’s gotten worse since we moved here. She just seems to mope around all of the time—daydreaming or something. She should be outside running around with friends.”

Her father cleared his throat and looked up from the paper. “Let’s not start about this moving thing again. Anyway, maybe we should think about that shrink we talked about. She’ll even meet with us on a weekend. Maybe the school specialist is the wrong person for her.”

“A child psychiatrist, Tom,” her mom said. “Not a shrink. It sounds so depressing.”

Jessie’s mouth fell open.

*A what? A shrink? Wasn't that for crazy people? Am I crazy?*

Jessie froze on the stairs, her little hands gripping the railing. Why was she such a failure? Why was everything so complicated? She could feel her mind racing, circling over a deep blackness. *No. No. It'll be okay*, she thought. *You're a queen. Remember? You are not crazy. It will be okay. Please be okay . . .*

She almost turned back upstairs to hide in her closet but forced a smile instead and announced with fake cheerfulness: "Here I am!"

Both her mom and dad stopped talking. There was a brief puzzlement in their eyes. Jessie realized they were embarrassed. Jessie took a deep breath.

"Can I help you mom?"

"You look nice Jessie." Her mom didn't sound convincing. "Everything is all set. Why don't you play with Bobby until they arrive?"

Bobby was a giggling flash of legs and arms as he sped down through the room toward the front door. "They here!" he cheered, clapping his hands.

Sure enough, Jessie could hear the crunch of tires on their gravel driveway. Jessie went to the living room window and pulled the curtain aside. They were getting out of a white minivan. Jessie's mom checked her hair in the hall mirror.

"You look wonderful," Jessie's dad said. He waved Jessie over, who was still standing in the living room. "Jessie, come on, I want you to be on your best behavior. And stop slouching!"

There was a lot of small talk among the parents but Jessie and Rita just glared at each other. Bobby wandered around tugging at legs and laughing. He stopped and looked up at Rita with a squint. He cocked his head to one side. "Your name is no Rita!" And then he scampered off to play in the living room.

Jessie's parents looked at one another, but the Liggins seemed not to notice.

Rita's lips curled in a smile, but her eyes held no warmth.

Jessie's mom touched her daughter on the shoulder. "Why don't you show Rita your room?"

Here she was. The tormentor. Leader of the girls who always seemed to go out of their way to make her life hell.

Jessie felt like she would shrivel up and die. *Not this*, she thought. *Oh not this!* This was a nightmare she couldn't wake up from, a fear she couldn't outrun.

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They stood like statues in her bedroom, glaring at each other. Finally, Rita glanced around the room, coolly, without much interest. She noticed the books on a small shelf above a study desk. "They're all lies," Rita said, almost as if talking to herself. "Distractions and illusions."

Jessie made a move toward Rita. "Leave them alone. Don't touch them."

Rita laughed. "I wouldn't dare. They're silly. No one believes in such things."

Jessie almost yelled, "I do!" but remained silent. It wasn't worth it. Rita would never understand.

Rita crept up close to some paintings on the wall. She looked at them intently. "You do these?"

Jessie nodded. Rita studied the details; mist covered mountains, emerald green forests, wildflowers. And much to Jessie's astonishment, she didn't offer any insults. Merely a slight twitch of her mouth and a slight nod of the head. She spun around to Jessie.

"Where's your friend now?" Rita said. "That nasty lady isn't here to save your butt. She might have scared the others but not me. She should mind her own business."

“You said you knew her.”

Rita gave Jessie a shrug. “I’ve seen her before. Always around where she doesn’t belong. Such a big meddler! I thought she’d gone away.”

“Who is she? A parent? Teacher?”

Rita moved closer. “Doesn’t matter! She’s not going to help you! No one is going to help you! You are not the one!”

Jessie backed away to the edge of her bed. “Stop it. Just stop it. I’ve never done anything to you. Why do you hate me so much? You don’t even know me!”

Rita smiled, showing small perfect teeth. “I don’t have to know you. You don’t belong here. You don’t belong anywhere. You are too weak. I don’t know what’s so special about you anyway. Just go away!”

Jessie sat on the bed. She lowered her head. Moments slowed to a crawl. Silence weighed down on her. Finally, Rita spoke and you could hear the twisting sneer in her voice. The ridicule.

“You have a Playstation?”

Jessie shook her head.

“Switch?”

Jessie again shook her head.

“Do you even have a smartphone? Android? iPhone? Anything?”

“My parents say I’m too—”

Rita laughed and it ripped through Jessie like a knife. “You’re not a freak. You’re nothing. You’re just taking up space. And the saddest thing? Your parents know it too. I don’t know what anyone sees in you.”

Jessie stood up, trembling, her face twisted in pain and anger, her breath coming hard and uncontrollable. “Get out! Get out of my house!”

Rita cocked her head to one side and smiled thinly. “Your parents wouldn’t like that, would they? You’re always embarrassing them. This would really make things worse for them. The freak of a daughter who can’t make friends, who can’t do anything right.”

Jessie wiped tears away and tried to calm her breathing. She felt defeated. Empty. *Worthless. So alone.* Rita’s words kept hitting her like physical blows until she felt numb.

Rita sighed and moved over to Jessie’s study desk. She sat, promptly took

out her phone, and began to text someone. After a bit, she looked up and smiled that cold smile.

“Wait until I tell the others,” she said, her eyes flashing with cruel amusement. “It’s going to be all over school. All over town!”

The night was a seemingly endless nightmare. They sat in Jessie’s room avoiding each other's presence. Rita stared at her phone, up at the walls, at her own tapping feet. Jessie lay on her bed, her eyes closed; lost beyond the room, in cold darkness searching for the warm light of her sanctuary, her kingdom, but it was all so far away. She remembered the words and began to silently say them, over and over again: “My breath and my heart are one. My breath and my soul are one. I am one. I am one.” Slowly, she didn’t feel so alone anymore.

When dinner was finally announced, they both flew down the stairs without a word.

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The parents kept trying to force the two girls together but it was obvious to all that they didn’t like each other. Jessie’s mom kept giving her these urgent looks as if to say, “What is wrong with you?”

Finally it was over. Rita and her parents stood at the front door, soft laughter and handshakes and offers for future visits all around. Rita smiled

warmly, thanking Jessie's mom and dad. She patted Bobby's head as he squirmed out of the way. As they headed down the driveway, Rita turned to Jessie in the doorway, her smile slowly fading. For a moment, Jessie thought she saw a strange darkness, like a shadow, passing in front of Rita. And through this darkness, Jessie saw something unexpected in Rita's face. A strange gentleness. Sadness. And then she mouthed the words, *"Go away."*

That night in bed, Jessie tossed and turned, her mind racing a million miles an hour. She had to get away from here. This was killing her. She had no idea where she was going to go but only that she had to get away. Very far away.

She endured the dark, endless drudgery of her life because one day she was going to slip away and find her lost kingdom. Find her true home. Then her family would acknowledge her with respect. Then they would know remorse for all the disappointments they ever had about her.

She thought of Rita's words. *Yes. I'll go away . . . .*

# CHAPTER 3

## JESSIE'S PLAN

*“The magister paced about the darkened audience hall, agitated, full of dire predictions, and helpless to prove his truth to the Court. ‘There is a land far to the south, where summer never ends,’ he had told the queen. ‘A gracious land. A land free of darkness.’” –A Fall of Stardust*

The next week in school was an endless agony. Though Rita was nowhere to be seen again, the other girls, having gotten over their fear of that strange woman, were laughing at her more than ever. Worse, the whole school seemed to be making fun of her now. Jessie wondered where the woman had gone to and if she was ever going to come back. Where was she? Where was her friend?

Her parents were very quiet whenever she was around. Their eyes never quite meeting hers. As if they were ashamed of her. Or maybe afraid. Jessie knew what was happening. Felt it in the coldness of their looks. In the strange silences between them. She knew that they were going to send her to some shrink.

The time had finally come. There was no longer any reason to wait. Now or never, Jessie thought. Before it's too late.

It was time.

She started taking money out of her mom's wallet and hiding it under her mattress. She gave up trying to smile. Trying to fake happiness. On Saturday morning she was going to take a few belongings and run. Where? She didn't know. Only that she had to go.

As Saturday drew closer, the cold knot in her stomach grew larger and larger. Jessie was caught between two building storms: one full of shadows and wailing winds and the other a desperate cry for love and acceptance. No matter though, she was determined to get away from everything and everyone who made her feel small and useless.

\* \* \*

On Friday night at dinner, Jessie's mom finally said what had been unspoken but very much felt, like an icy presence hovering over them, for the past week.

"Jessie, your dad and I feel that you need someone to talk with. We don't feel that the specialist at school is the right person for you. We're thinking of arranging a visit with a psychiatrist." She said all of this between mouthfuls of food.

"What?" Jessie said, her fork falling from her fingers, clattering on her plate.

“A shrink?”

“Where did you hear that word? She’s a child psychiatrist. You’d like her, she’s very nice. It’s nothing to be afraid of. She is just someone who likes listening to what children have to say.”

Jessie wanted to say, “I got that word from dad!” but she was too scared to say it. She also wanted to tell them not to bother—that she wouldn’t even be here when they woke up in the morning.

Jessie simply nodded. “May I be excused?”

\* \* \*

That night Jessie went to bed very early. But sleep would not come easily. Wiping away her tears as she stared at the ceiling, she could hear her parents talking downstairs. Muffled words, some louder than others. She opened her door and crept down the hall and crouched at the top of the stairs, listening:

“The more I think about it, the more I feel uneasy about this psychiatrist thing,” her mom said. “It seems so . . . I don’t know, so extreme? I know you don’t want me talking about it, but this all really started after your mother died and the move here has only made it worse.”

Her grandmother. Her *Oma*. Jessie had felt her eyes grow hot and stinging. *Why did she have to die? Why? It had been like the sun had disappeared from the sky.*

Her dad cleared his throat. "Look, Susan, I didn't want to come here but I had no choice. It was either take the job offer or wind up moving in with your parents. And that wasn't going to happen. Besides, it's only an evaluation. We need to understand what's going on with Jessie. It's getting worse."

"I know," her mom said, sighing. "It just feels like a big step. I don't know how she's going to react. Have you had time to think about that summer camp program? It comes highly recommended. Might do her a world of good."

"It sounds promising. One of my co-worker's sent his kids to it last year. Said it was the best experience of their lives. But . . . first things first. Let's get this evaluation done."

"Tom, we really should reconsider the phone. She's in middle school now."

"That's a bucket of worms we don't want to kick over," he said. "In her state of mind? I know we can't protect her from everything . . . why do kids want to grow up so quickly? Being an adult isn't all fun and games."

Jessie stifled a sob. She had felt betrayed. How could her parents do this to her? *Why?* She fled to her bed and crawled under the covers. She wept into her

pillow, her breath coming in great heaves, her body curled up tight.

When sleep finally did wrap around her weary mind, after what seemed like hours of tear stained staring at the shadows on the ceiling, it arrived with awful nightmares. Full of clawed fingers lunging from the darkness, the sounds of cold laughter echoing all around her like wings. And through it all Jessie ran. Ran as fast as she ever had, her little heart hammering, her breath stolen away . . . . .

# CHAPTER 4

## JESSIE’S JOURNEY

*“The long and ragged lines of the Fair Folk snaked through a blasted landscape, ravaged by biting winds, nightmare creatures, and the utter despair of being so far from their beloved home.” –A Fall of Stardust*

Jessie awoke to the tentative chirps of the first morning birds. It was still dark outside but she knew it would be getting light soon. She quietly got out of bed, slipped on some clothes, and gathered the things she would need. She took a change of clothes and put them in a backpack. She then took the money out from under her bed. She stood gazing at her room. *One last look around*, she thought. Her fantasy drawings on the walls. The unmade bed. The little desk and her books. “Oh,” she said softly, “can’t forget that.” She picked up the copy of *A Fall of Stardust* and hugged it tight. She slipped it into her backpack.

She opened her bedroom door and cocked her head, listening. She could hear her father snoring softly. Somewhere outside a dog barked. She crept down the darkened hallway and stood by her brother's door. She closed her eyes. "Bye, Bobby . . . ."

Tears welled up, stinging in her eyes but there was nothing else she could do. Though this world, this house, this time and place was all she'd ever known, she had to leave. When she left, people would be happy again.

Jessie turned away and quietly went down the stairs.

She went into the kitchen and quietly made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. She hoped her mom wouldn't be upset that she used up all of the bread. The more she thought about it, the more she felt bad about taking her mom's money. It was stealing. It didn't feel right. Jessie looked at the bills, counted them out, and put nearly all of it on the counter; she'd only keep her allowance.

She took the sandwiches, a bag of potato chips, a bag of cookies, and a couple of bananas. What about water? She couldn't last long without water--it was the one thing her mom was always talking about since moving to Texas. Hydration. You had to drink lots of water to stay healthy. Her mom drank water all day long. Jessie reached into the fridge and took out her mom's water jug. She hoped her mom wouldn't be mad at her for taking it.

She stuffed all of these things into her backpack. She thought about leaving a message on the fridge's dry-ink board. She imagined the panic her parents would feel when they realized she was gone. A part of her wanted that panic. Would serve them right. But the other part of her felt a pang of regret. She really did want them to be happy again.

"I need to leave. I'm sorry. You did your best," she wrote. "Thank you."

It was going to be a warm day. It was the middle of May and summer was already in the air. There was still a week left of school, but for Jessie it was already over.

Jessie softly closed the front door. She looked out across the scraggly lawn. The street was empty. Streetlights were beginning to shut off one by one. All the houses on the street were silent, curtains and blinds drawn shut, with porch lights on a few still shining in the last moments of a fading night. Jessie lived in a newer development on the northeast side of Houston, Texas. This meant that most of the houses looked the same. The front yard still had bare spots where new grass had yet to grow. The backyard was ugly and bare--though her mother tried to plant a garden. It hadn't done well since they were in a drought with water restrictions being enforced. And that didn't help the spindly young trees that had been planted here and there. Mostly it all seemed so plain and whitewashed.

An orange cat stopped and watched her for a moment then moved on, disappearing into the shadow under a neighbor's car. Jessie's sneakers grew wet from the morning dew as she headed across the patchwork front yard, across the driveway, and around the corner to the backyard gate. It took a couple of tries but she finally got the combination lock off. From inside the gate, she wheeled her 10-speed bike out, slipped on her backpack, and coasted down the driveway. She stopped and took one last look around.

These surroundings were nothing like her old, beautiful farmhouse and barn back in Pennsylvania. She missed the green hills and cold sparkling streams. The magical shadowy woods out behind the house with its leaf-covered floor and chattering squirrels that leaped from branch to branch. She longed to hear the high circling *caw-caw* of crows. She even missed the hush of falling snow. Texas, at least in this area, was so hot and humid and the air--from all those refineries and chemical plants--made her eyes water. She remembered how she'd cried when her dad told her about the move to Texas. Texas? All she knew about Texas was cowboys, cows, and flat, endless deserts covered in cactus and tumbleweeds. It wasn't like that of course, as she discovered later. At least not down in the southeastern part of the state. Here, there were lots of tall, skinny pine trees, rotting swamps, half-empty strip malls, and all those ugly refineries. It was the reason why they moved here. Jessie's dad was a chemical engineer who worked for a large oil company.

"We have to go where the work is," her dad said. "It'll be okay. You'll make new friends. It'll be alright."

But he lied. It wasn't okay.

It will never be okay.

As Jessie sped down the street, she realized just how scared she was--her heart pounding away, her hands gripping the handlebars until her knuckles shown white through her skin. Of course, she was scared of everything! But this was

something more. Then she realized . . . yes, there was an underlying difference to the cold knot in her stomach. She was excited as well! She was on a grand adventure! Who knew how it would turn out, but for once she was doing something instead of reacting. Instead of letting things happen to her. She was actually doing this for herself.

Jessie was glad that she had left so early. Usually it took quite a lot of effort to get out of bed—to begin another endless, painful day. But not today. She'd hardly slept, her eyes opening over and over again to look at the digital clock on her nightstand. It seemed like morning would never arrive.

Now she was flying down the street, warm humid air flowing through her hair, as the sun began to shine through the tall pines in the distance. This early on a Saturday morning she would be able to avoid most people. Oh sure, the early risers would be out puttering in their yards, but Jessie would keep to herself and ride to a nearby park that she knew from a recent family outing.

It hadn't been the best picnic but at least it had been quiet and relatively empty of people. Later, of course, the fire ants had made things interesting, and Bobby had to be stopped from chasing ducks into the pond, and dad never did get the charcoal grill properly lit, and mom sat on a picnic bench, wiping her face and wilting in the humidity. In all though, it was a decent park. Jessie would stop there and then decide what she wanted to do.

Jessie was filled with so many conflicting emotions and thoughts. But

mostly excitement raced through her body as she pedaled faster and faster, from the familiar streets of her neighborhood, past car lots, deserted streets, and closed businesses, until finally she found herself out into the brightening countryside. Her thoughts ranged far ahead of her, almost singing in the joy of being free and alone.

After about a half mile, she slowed down, her brakes squeaking; Jessie realized that she wasn't really paying attention to where she was heading. The road was straight as an arrow, bordered by pines on one side and fenced-in cow pastures on the other.

Was this the way to the park? Jessie wasn't sure anymore. She'd only been there once before and she hadn't paid that much attention as she sat in the back of the car. Up ahead, a dirt road went off to the left. An old farmhouse stood nearby, its roof falling in, peeling walls sagging, thistle and Indian paintbrush growing high along the edges. It seemed familiar. Did we turn up that road? She took a deep breath and began pedaling, the tires on her bicycle stuttering on the rocky surface. Soon the road was hemmed-in by swaying, tall pines and dogwood, and looked less and less familiar.

After a while, Jessie decided she was lost. She stopped her bike and gulped down some water. It was then that she noticed a faint path leading into the woods. Something about this path called to her. This did seem familiar. It shouldn't have, since she'd never been here before . . . or had she? It was like a small part of an old memory surfacing in her mind. It reminded her of a path that led to a

favorite spot in the woods—but that had been in Pennsylvania. Still, it didn't seem dangerous. It almost felt . . . like she was coming home. *Very strange*, she thought. *I'll just go a little ways. See where it leads.*

\* \* \*

She pedaled slowly. Aside from bumping over a few exposed tree roots, the path was smooth, free of rocks, and carpeted with soft pine needles. From time to time she glanced up at the tree limbs that crowded the sky. *It's like a green tunnel*, she thought, *and so quiet*. She stopped and listened. A soft breeze touched her face and she closed her eyes. She felt that old memory again and a sudden longing—a gentle, bittersweet feeling of homesickness. But it wasn't for her home back in the subdivision, not even for her farmhouse in Pennsylvania, but for somewhere else, someplace she knew and loved but couldn't quite remember. She opened her eyes, sniffed, and used a knuckle to wipe the tears away.

*Where do I belong? Where?*

The thought was a cold whisper. And she had no answer.

"I am a queen!" she called out to the trees. She began to pedal again, now leaning over her handlebars, feeling the air rush past as she gained speed, her hair streaming behind her like a dark banner.

"I am a queen!" she repeated, as the feeling of sadness turned to

excitement and anticipation. She laughed. “I am returning to my kingdom!”

Queen Jessie would be reunited with her fine white horse. She would be clad in shining armor and wield a greatsword that glowed with fire. And then she’d show Rita. She’d show all of the kids at school and make them feel bad for all of the rotten things they had ever said to her. They’d see her magnificence and they would kneel before her mercy. And she would be merciful and compassionate and they would all realize how wonderful she was. They’d all be green with envy. That would show them!

As she rode deeper into the woods, her mind spiraled around the happiness that seemed to be almost within reach, and her heart swelled with the warmth and joy she knew only from dreams. She would find her kingdom. Her real home. And it would be a welcoming place for others like her. The heartbroken ones. The lonely ones. The scared ones. And they would all love one another. Take care of each other. They would all be the sisters she never had—

Jessie slammed on her brakes, her rear tire skidding sideways on the damp grass. Ahead, the way narrowed, grew rocky, and full of gnarled roots like half buried ropes snaking out of the ground. Curiously, the roots brought to mind the lost struggle of some giant who had been tied up and buried in a shallow hole. Further on, she could see the path splitting right and left. It was darker this far into the woods; the sun but small sparkles of light in the thick tree cover above.

Jessie got off her bike, laid it against a tree, and approached the fork in the

rapidly narrowing path. It was now more like a trail used by animals. She was really lost now. She felt panic rising, rushing up to wipe away her earlier feelings of excitement. She thought of her parents. Would they have an amber alert sent out? Did they even care? Would they be relieved to have such a problem child go away? She thought of all the girls back at school, especially Rita. Would she celebrate? Would they all text their little hateful messages and congratulate each other for her disappearance?

All of these thoughts filled her head and she always came back to these dark middle-of-the-night thoughts:

*What is wrong with me?*

*Why do I feel this way?*

How long had she been riding? Four hours? Five? Was the sun much higher now? She looked up and frowned. Where was the sun?

She shivered and folded her arms across her chest. She realized the warm, humid day had suddenly changed in the wooded twilight. It was much cooler now and the silence around her felt like a heavy, living presence pressing down on her ears. She felt truly alone in these woods. It wasn't the loneliness she'd felt crying in her bed late at night. It wasn't the sadness of watching other people playing and laughing. This felt like she had been torn away from everything and everyone she knew. She felt outside of all human connections, outside of the entire

universe, outside of even her own small idea of God. She started to breathe heavily, very quickly, as if she was going to never catch her breath again. As if she would never fill her lungs again. She knelt, her head hanging, her hands gripping grass, her body heaving.

Nothing was familiar to her. Everything seemed somehow different. She looked behind her and realized that she didn't even know which way she had come. The air was growing colder and she shivered. She took off her backpack and pulled out a hooded sweatshirt. As she put on the hoodie, she sank down on a bank of damp moss, utterly exhausted, and let the tears fall.

She rocked back and forth.

“Where am I?”

Slowly, she forced herself to concentrate on the words the woman taught her: “My breath and my heart are one. My breath and my soul are one. I am one. I am one.”

After a long few moments, she felt a calmness embrace her. A warm presence surrounded her. A slow, loving hug that slowed her breathing, her spinning mind, her aching loneliness. She closed her eyes and drifted. . . .

From a distance, she heard the soft murmur of water.

“A stream,” Jessie murmured. There had been clear, cold streams back in Pennsylvania, but not here in her new home. Here, there were swamps and rivers of dark, muddy water that smelled of rotted plants, full of snakes and alligators. She opened her eyes. Ahead, as if looking through an arched doorway, the forest parted to reveal the brightness of an open field. And from within all that shimmering light was the sound of gurgling water.

She rubbed her eyes, got up, and began walking in the direction of the sound. As she passed the last of the trees, a loud croak came from overhead. She looked up into a maze of branches. A large bird cocked its head at her. A crow, or maybe a raven. It cocked its head again and made a rasping noise. The bird’s shiny black-marbled eyes blinked once, twice, and then with a flutter of its wings flew off into the sunlight. Jessie followed and the world beyond fell wide, sloping down to a sun-bathed clearing, carpeted with bluebells, daisies, and sunflowers. Small streams, flashing white in the sun, snaked through the wildflowers and knee-high grass. In the far distance high snow-capped mountains stood blue and hazy against a summer sky.

*This is impossible, she thought. Where is this place? Where am I?* Jessie took a step back, turned, and let out a startled cry. The forest was gone. There was only the meadow falling away gently, and then rising to meet a stand of trees.

“This can’t be real!” Jessie said. “Where am I?”

And then she took a sharp breath. Ahead was an old barn, tilted on one side, as if slowly sinking into the ground. There was something familiar about it. As she walked closer she realized it looked very much like the old barn from their farmhouse in Pennsylvania.

*What is happening?*

Beyond the old barn, a familiar farmhouse appeared, ghostly, wavering like a mirage in the sunlight. She heard barking. A yellow-haired lab was running through the grass, chasing butterflies. *Dusty?* Tears filled her eyes. It couldn't be Dusty . . . he'd been hit by a car on the blind curve near the farmhouse. Two years ago.

"Dusty!" she called out. "Dusty!" But the dog never stopped and soon faded from sight.

Jessie stood at the entrance to the old barn, its large doors hanging open, crooked, and broken. Above her, the raven waited silently, watching from the loft opening. She entered a darkness shot through by shafts of dust-filled light from the ruined roof. The barn floor was littered with dirty, wet straw. Rusting farm tools hung on rotted walls. The barn smelled musty. Damp. In the middle of the barn, sitting in a ray of sunlight, was a small doll with a cracked porcelain face, blue button eyes, and matted golden hair. Her grandmother's doll, given to Jessie on her third birthday. She remembered *Oma* saying: "This is Katie. She's been with me since I was your age. She was a very good friend and now she will be your

friend.”

Jessie began to sob. She knelt before the doll, her hand reaching out, trembling. “Oh, Katie,” she whispered through her grief.” She picked up the doll and held her tight. “I thought I lost you forever.”

Katie had been her constant companion, even more so after *Oma* had died. Her friend. Her guardian. Her touchstone. The one who always listened without judgment. The one who had always been there for her. And then one day, before the family moved to Texas, she had disappeared. Jessie had searched for her everywhere. It was like a light had been extinguished in her life. She begged her mom and dad to postpone the move. She wept and screamed and nothing had been the same after that. Her heart had been broken and something else too, her connection to her parents, her trust in them, her belief in them. There was still love, but it was now distant, unsure, and full of sadness.

Holding Katie tightly to her chest, she emerged from the barn, her eyes squinting in the sun. All around her, she saw one memory after another forming and then dissipating like smoke. A ferris wheel, paint peeling, rusting, loomed ahead frozen against the sky, and she recognized it from the county fair in Pennsylvania. She passed by a tricycle half sunk in the wet earth by the stream, only the tasseled handlebars and torn plastic seat visible. Another birthday present.

Jessie found herself standing in a lush garden of herbs and wildflowers, and

there was her grandmother. *Oma Doris*, standing in the sun, her old straw hat glowing translucent in the golden light, a soil-stained gloved hand wiping a strand of gray hair from her brow, and a smile that spread like sunrise across her face as she saw little Jessie.

“*Oma!*” Jessie cried. “Oh, *Oma!*” She ran to her grandmother, her arms outstretched, one hand holding up Katie, tears running down her cheeks. Her heart felt like it would burst. But Jessie’s hand reached through her grandmother as everything grew pale, shimmered like heat waves off a hot road, and vanished.

Everywhere, it seemed, her childhood was scattered like ghosts come to remind her, to stitch together her memories in a tapestry of all the things she had thought forgotten, lost, or forever unreachable. And yet, a part of her was beginning to realize how empty such memories were—seeping into existence, but having no real substance. These were the real ghosts. She looked down at Katie, her tears becoming Katie’s tears, and watched as the doll grew transparent, blown away like mist in the wind.

“I don’t want to be here,” Jessie whispered. “I don’t belong here.”

A warm breeze caressed her, lifting the bangs from her forehead, and Jessie closed her eyes and hugged herself tightly. After what seemed an eternity, but more like a few minutes, she heard it again. The sound of falling water. She opened her eyes and the world felt different. Only fields of wildflowers now. No barn. No farmhouse. No raven. No memories at all.

Falling from cliffs ahead, towering over a line of tall pines was the most beautiful waterfall she had ever seen. The sun-glittered water fell in a frothy mane to a large pond below, from which a gurgling stream snaked away through the grass and wildflowers. She held a hand above her eyes and squinted at the mountains in the distance, rising pale and blue in the afternoon haze.

And then she heard a voice, like a whisper on a breeze, coming from the pond. It was a song, weaving through the air like threads of gold, lilting, drifting, filling Jessie with such peace and calm. She couldn't make out the words but the sound, the beautiful sound wrapped itself around her and through her body. All her fears, all her confusion, all her doubts melted away. She felt loved. Truly loved for the first time in a very long time.

Clad in a flowing sky-blue dress, long blonde hair haloed by golden light, the woman sang to Jessie. And as she sang, she moved through the waterfall, approaching like mist over the pond.

# CHAPTER 5

## JESSIE AND SUMMER'S LAND

*"Kandlin, the Queen's scout, dropped to his weary knees as the land widened before him. In the distance he could see shafts of golden light piercing the storm clouds, shining on a river that curved silver through forests and plains of greenness." –A Fall of Stardust*

"I am so happy to see you again!" The woman said, coming gently to rest among the wildflowers.

Jessie stared. She stuttered. "It-it-it's you! And you just walked on water!"

"Oh? Did I? I had not noticed." Her eyes sparkled with warmth and kindness and her whole being shimmered in the sunlight. She opened her arms wide.

"Welcome! I have been waiting a long time to see you here."

"What is this place?" Jessie asked the woman who seemed both very old and very young.

The woman nodded. "I know this can be a difficult place," she said. "But it must be travelled through. We call it Raven's End. It is an in-between place. A

place of memory. Not all who come here find it a happy place.”

“It’s happy and sad,” Jessie said. “Not a place I’d want to visit for very long.”

“There are those who live here forever,” the woman said, smiling sadly. “For others, once is enough.”

“Who are you?”

“Do you not remember?” The woman cocked her head to one side and smiled. “I am your friend. I have many names but you can call me Caelia.”

“Caelia? I know that name. It’s the name of the Faerie Queen in my most favorite book!”

“Hmmm, now that is interesting!” Again, that sparkle. “We have been called many things, faeries, Fair Folk, Fae, the Seelie Court, the Elana . . .”

“This isn’t real, is it? It can’t be.” Somewhere deep within her heart, Jessie heard a whisper: *Please let it not be a dream. Please. Please.*

Caelia laughed; a beautiful musical sound, not like the cruel laughter of people making fun or being hateful, but full of delight and joy.

“Maybe you’re finally awake, my dear Jessie. Maybe everything else is a

dream.”

Jessie looked up at the blue sky, at the cotton ball clouds that drifted slowly by, and at the waterfall in the distance. She took a deep breath of cool, clean air.

“I want to believe,” Jessie said, lowering her head. “I thought faeries and things only existed in books. The world, the world I live in everyday, has no room for faeries and magic. It’s all made-up. Make believe. At least that’s what my parents tell me.”

Caelia nodded, her eyes turning sad. “The world has become a shadow of what it once was. Nobody really believes in anything anymore, especially magic. My people have watched in sorrow and felt our hearts being smothered and our existence growing dimmer. We have become ever distant and lonely. But we are very happy you are here.”

Jessie shook her head. “Why am I here?”

“We have felt your sadness from the beginning. It called out to us . . . at first but a shapeless, voiceless reaching out, then turning into a heart shaped by loss and abandonment and such bewildering pain. We could not ignore this. We could not avoid this. But we also saw your glow. It has waxed and waned, this spark of hope and belief and, yes, of magic.”

“Faeries have been watching me?”

“Of course. We have always been near. Just beyond the senses. Just slightly beyond touch. A whisper away. We were once much closer, in the olden days. We spoke to people often then. Not so much now. Hearts have grown hard. Eyes have grown dim.”

“People used to talk to faeries?”

“Yes. It was a common thing. We shared much knowledge back then—especially of magic. But people learned to fear us, they lost the ability to know real love, and in their fear they tried to destroy this magic. It became evil in their hearts. But magic cannot be destroyed. Magic is a living spirit and it exists whether people remember it or not.”

Jessie heard the words but they weren't clear. “What do you mean?”

“Let us walk and I will show you.”

They wandered along a gurgling, meandering stream. The air filled with the scent of wildflowers, the sun overhead warm and soothing, and Jessie had never known such happiness. At least not since Pennsylvania.

“See the fox?” Caelia asked. Jessie searched the flowers and heather and caught a flash of red fur and then two bright eyes. The eyes blinked.

“Oh, yes.”

“Her name is Kit and she has something to say to you.”

Caelia held out hand toward the fox, who was trying to slink away. “Now, now, you are not going anywhere. I want you to come here and speak to Jessie.”

The fox rose up and slowly approached, head down, avoiding Jessie’s eyes. When the fox got to within a few feet she looked up and grinned, her green eyes shining brightly.

“What do you have to say?” Caelia folded her arms across her chest. “Go on, Kit.”

Jessie heard the words in her head. Faintly at first and then louder. She looked at the fox, who sat with her head bowed, her tail swaying slowly in the grass.

“Sorry . . . I am sorry for being so cruel.”

“What?” Jessie took a step back. She shook her head. *I’m hearing things*, she thought. *Did the fox say something? This can’t be real!*

Caelia laughed. “This is real, Jessie.”

“But, I heard it in my head. The fox—”

Caelia knelt next to the fox and whispered something in her black-tipped ear. Jessie heard only the last part of her words. “. . . show her.”

And then the fox began to change, grow larger, shimmering and shifting with a golden light that made Jessie squint. The fox was no longer the fox.

Jessie gasped. “No! Stay away! Get away!”

Instead of a little red fox, there stood a red-haired girl. A girl Jessie knew very well.

*Rita.*

Jessie, with panic in her eyes, moved away. Why was Rita here? This wasn't right. This didn't feel magical. She was afraid. Who were these people? What was happening?

*I am going crazy, she thought. It's finally happened.*

Rita started crying, and that wasn't something Jessie expected. She looked at Caelia, waiting for her to explain, to say something, anything.

“Rita is not real? I mean, she's not . . . I met her parents! She goes to my

school! How can she be a fox?”

Rita struggled to speak, “It was all an illusion. It is called *glamour*. A trick. I made people see what I wanted them to see. I’m sorry.”

“Rita, as you know her, was not supposed to hurt you. And she was not supposed to use her *glamour* in this manner.” Caelia paused and looked sadly at the red-haired girl. Rita wiped away her tears and nodded. “She was supposed to help you. To guide you. But—”

Rita interrupted, “I tried so hard. I let the world, your world, change me. All the noise and confusion and emptiness . . . it is all around and it hurts and you get angry and you want to fight it but you cannot and you are left with such meanness. It is not a safe place for us to visit anymore.” Rita stopped and took a deep breath. “What has happened to your world? It was once so beautiful. So full of light and love. When I was there, all I wanted to do was tear down and destroy any remaining beauty. I saw you, felt your innocence, and it all made me sick. I spent too long in your world. I became everything I hated. I am so sorry. Forgive me.”

Rita sobbed, and her sorrow was deep and painful. She trembled and fell to her knees. The light and her shape shifted and Rita became a fox once again.

A harsh glint came into Caelia’s eyes, an impersonal change that sent a chill through Jessie. An image of terrible beauty flashed through her mind, full of cold

fury and sudden cruelty. And it touched Jessie like burning ice. And she recoiled slightly in the knowing of something not human, something far beyond the concerns of mere mortals.

“Kit must be punished,” Caelia said, “and you must choose her punishment.” The fox cowered in the wildflowers, her ears pinned flat against her head. “Banishment? The taking away of her glamour? Which shall it be?”

Jessie felt anger rise up in her. A terrible fury as she remembered all the slights, all the taunts, the fear and misery inflicted upon her. She stared down at the fox, her hands trembling fists, her eyes stinging with tears. And all the hurt and hatred within her battled for control against an unfolding openness, a blossoming of understanding.

*There has been enough hate. There has been enough fear.*

“No,” Jessie said finally. “I won’t punish her. Kit has suffered enough.” She knelt down and embraced the weeping fox. “It’s okay, Kit. Don’t be afraid. It’s okay. I understand. I do, really.”

“Love,” Caelia said, nodding, the coldness in her eyes fading. “You have shown us the true measure. It is a word that is used much in your world but without real knowing. It has been hollowed out. It lacks compassion. Kindness. When you have forgotten yourself, when you no longer believe in anything, love becomes empty, a ghost. Love is the true heart of magic and your world is in

danger of losing it forever.”

Jessie buried her face in the fox’s soft, warm fur, feeling a wonderful sense of acceptance, of peace, and, yes, of love.

“But you,” Caelia said, “within you, there is a great love that is desperate to be released. Grief, my child, is love that has no place to call home. All the love you want to offer but cannot. We have seen this. You are here because of it. There is hope for both of our worlds. You and those like you are the saving graces of us all.”

Jessie stroked the fox’s head, rose up and faced Caelia; thoughts swirled around in her head like frantic butterflies. *Our worlds? Hope? Love? Me?*

She shook her head at Caelia. “I’m 13 years old. How can I do anything? How can love do anything? You are asking too much.”

“I am only asking that which is already within you. No more. Reach out. Make the connection again. Trust in yourself and your feelings. Embrace the wonder. Let the magic grow!” Caelia swept her hand at the sky, at the meadow and the distant mountains. “Can you feel it? Lean your spirit outwards! Listen! Can you not hear us?”

Jessie hesitated, a part of her still didn’t believe. This was so strange. So incredible. She closed her eyes; she heard only confused thoughts, fearful thoughts, tired and disappointing thoughts. These were the old dark and familiar

thoughts of her daily life. She realized that she was afraid to let these thoughts go. She was very afraid. All her life, she wanted to fit in and not be different. She was afraid of not being loved. And yet, though she tried very hard, she didn't fit in. She was an outcast. She didn't feel loved. It was a cruel and painful circle.

Caelia, as if hearing Jessie's thoughts, held out her hand. "Most people feel alone and not connected," she said. "Come with me." Hand in hand, they began to walk through the wildflowers. Kit, the fox took after them, her small white teeth showing in a smile.

"And that is why they do everything they can to fit into a world they no longer understand," Caelia continued, "even at the expense of their true feelings. Fear has replaced love and in the face of this all-devouring force, nothing natural or pure or magical can continue to exist."

Jessie thought of her parents. She tried to look past her childhood expectations and experiences, the cluttered small world of being a child, and she felt—no, she knew, their fear. It was a revelation that stung and her heart ached.

They were afraid that if their daughter was not like everyone else, not "normal," they would be failures. They're afraid of being bad parents—judged by their now distant hearts and by their own fearful friends and family. They're afraid that if Jessie was not a success, then neither were they.

"Close your eyes," Caelia said. "Feel your mind expand outward. Remember

how you imagined yourself as a bird? Now imagine everything around you, the warmth on your face, the sound of the wind, the water, the swaying rustle of trees, the dancing drone of a bumblebee . . . release yourself.”

Jessie slowed her thoughts, breathed, expanded, and felt herself moving beyond in all directions. Floating on the breeze, wrapped in warmth, turning in light, she began hearing, faintly, the sound of music, like the tinkling of tiny glass bells. The music grew louder and she could hear voices, sweet unearthly voices, and they sang in a language she didn’t know, that pierced her heart with joy and sadness. It was a song of longing, of farewells, of love found and lost, of endless cycles of time, and many other things Jessie did not quite understand. She was wrapped in a beauty so overwhelming, so profound, and so complete.

Jessie’s heart grew like a bonfire, devouring all the darkness, all the pain, all the loneliness in her little body. She opened her eyes, wiped away her tears, and saw everything as if for the first time. Full of wonder. Full of delight. Full of this place and this magical moment. Everything in a dance of becoming and ending, forever. Though so young, she felt both ancient and newly born, and though she didn’t have the words to express this knowledge, it was a knowing beyond question.

“You feel it,” Caelia said. “You have always known it. You are the bridge. Remember that.”

They walked in silence for a time. Soon the sun began to set, casting a last

drifting rainbow below the waterfall.

They stood at the water's edge. Jessie glanced down at her own rippled reflection, now surrounded by a deepening blue sky and fading gold light. Next to her, Caelia and Kit seemed to waver, shifting with the sunset and a warm sweet breeze.

"Be yourself, Jessie. Love every part of yourself. Love the daydreamer and the shy one. Love the lonely one who weeps in the dead of night. Love the scared one. Love the ones who are afraid. We are all connected. A great, beautiful web of life and death and love and magic."

Jessie felt something touch the back of her neck, like a door to a cold room had opened somewhere. She turned. Far off, beyond the meadow and above the distant mountains, a tide of dark clouds appeared to be spreading. *There's a storm coming*, Jessie thought, and wondered where those words came from. She heard the faint rumble of thunder. She shivered.

Caelia answered her thought in a whisper. "Yes. Time grows short. This portal shall end. Summer's Land and your world will grow ever apart. The veil between our worlds is growing deeper. But not quite yet. Let us continue the dream for a while longer."

It was dark now but with a wave of her hand, Caelia filled the night with dancing fireflies. Jessie rubbed her eyes as the pond grew faint and wavering,

thinning out like fading mist.

“For now, sleep, child, and in the time to come, be brave,” Caelia said.  
“There will be wonders and, yes, even sorrows to behold.”

Jessie felt a weariness sweep over her; it had been such a long and emotionally exhausting day. As she lay down, surrounded by a ring of softly glowing yellow bonnet mushrooms. She snuggled with Rita. For the first time in ages, she didn't feel alone at all. And she didn't think about home.

# CHAPTER 6

## JESSIE AND THE QUEEN'S REALM

*"Here was a home to be reborn within. A blessed place rich with the fruits of harmony and sweet laughter. The queen turned and looked back at the way they had come. A long and terrible journey. She touched the earth and wept." –A Fall of Stardust*

Jessie woke up to the bright sound of birds chirping. She opened her eyes, and for a moment she felt a panic, that she was home, that everything she experienced had been but a beautiful dream. And then she heard the voice.

"Good morning, Jessie! I hope you slept well." Caelia was smiling and sitting on a rock by the stream. Rita the fox bounded over to Jessie and sat with head cocked, smiling.

And Jessie sighed. She laughed. For the first time in a very long time, she realized how wonderful it felt to be alive. To greet the morning with something more than fear and sadness. She didn't understand everything here but she didn't feel alone anymore.

“Good morning, Queen Caelia! And you, too Rita!”

“I thought today we would take a little trip,” Caelia said, rising up. “But first you must eat. Go on, there is a bit of honey cake and water for you.”

Jessie saw a jeweled bottle filled with clear water and a small bundle, made of silk wrapped in wildflowers. She took a sip of the cool water and it tasted so refreshing, so wonderful. She opened the bundle and picked up a square of golden bread. It smelled of warm milk and honey and flowers. She nibbled a piece and gasped. It was like the most wonderful cake she’d ever eaten.

“This . . . is delicious!”

“Go on, eat your fill. It will give you strength and energy!”

And Jessie realized she was starving and wolfed the cakes down.

“Ready for our little journey?”

Jessie nodded. “Yes!”

“What do you see over there?” Caelia pointed toward the waterfall. A bridge spanned the pond, its far end disappearing into the waterfall.

“Where did that come from?” Jessie was confused. The bridge had not been

there yesterday.

Caelia didn't answer. She just took Jessie's hand and together they walked toward the bridge, with Rita bounding ahead. It was arched and made of old, weathered stone. Jessie walked slowly across the bridge with Caelia and into the roaring mist. And yet they remained dry. The water didn't even touch them. As they entered a brief darkness, they came out on the other side and into a new world. A green and sun-dappled land with great, ancient trees that towered over them like giants.

"Welcome to my realm! Welcome to Summer's Land!" Caelia said with a bow.

Jessie stood in awe of the beauty before her. Birds chirped and warbled, their voices echoing through the trees. The air was so rich with the smell of fresh earth and wildflowers. Insects were busily scurrying to and fro. Bees droned in sunlit circles, flicking from flower to flower. She felt their quickness and simple happiness at being alive. Rita sat on her haunches; her muzzle parted and she gave a joyful yip before running off into the distance. And then Jessie heard it. Like the tinkling of silver—and Jessie thought, *this is the sound moonlight should make as it spills over the horizon on a summer's night.*

Laughter.

She caught something at the corner of her eye but when she looked,

whatever it was, was gone.

“They are a little afraid of you Jessie. They will slowly come out and meet you.”

“Who? You mean faeries?”

“Yes,” Caelia said. “The Fair Folk of Summer’s Land.”

“Everything here is so . . . intense. The colors, the sounds . . . everything. It’s like, until now, I’ve been living in one of those old black and white movies!”

“Because you are now seeing with your eyes and heart. You’re seeing the magic.”

Caelia was right. This place was magical. Everything was so alive.

Jessie felt something approaching from behind. It was like a cool rain-scented breeze on a warm afternoon. And it rushed over her, bringing memories of dusty roads damp after a storm. She didn’t want to turn abruptly and scare it away. She stayed still, trembling with excitement.

“Hello, Jessie.”

Jessie turned. A girl with long hair as black as a raven’s wing, stood in a ray

of sunlight, and she glowed like dark amber. She wore a long, shimmering dress made of green gossamer-- or so it seemed to Jessie. She had a crown of vines on her head. But the most beautiful and amazing thing was her wings; pale, translucent wings that emerged from folds in the back of her dress, slowly moving as she breathed. She smiled at Jessie and then lifted gently into the air with a flick of her wings. She twirled around in a graceful dance, tiny bells on her feet chiming as she lifted higher. Jessie was in shock and stared at her, unable to find her voice. When she turned to Caelia, she found that the Queen had vanished. Jessie felt a bolt of panic.

“You do not need to be afraid,” the faerie said as she drifted back to earth. “You are among friends.”

The faerie began to sing and it sounded all around Jessie, in her and through her. It flooded Jessie with feelings and images and memories—of many things that had touched her with goodness and joy and laughter. Warm baths and nights filled with stars, fresh sheets and clear spring mornings, hearing her brother’s laughter and hugging her dog Dusty. To Jessie, it was the most beautiful song she’d ever heard.

All around, Jessie noticed a shift in the light, as if the sun was moving quicker than usual, and shadows parted, reaching towards her and widening to nothing. It was as if the surrounding forest was coming to life. And then from the trees, people in glowing robes and dresses appeared, some flying on fragile wings, some walking, nearly drifting, toward her.

“I’ve lost my friend Caelia,” Jessie said, unable to think of anything else to say.

“Oh, she will be back.” The faerie said in a knowing way. “My name is Umbrielle, what is yours?”

“Je...Je...Jessie,” she stuttered.

“This is Jessie. She is here to visit,” Umbrielle shouted to the other faeries. In a blink of an eye, faeries crowded around Jessie. They were everywhere, in all shapes and sizes, old and young, male and female. And they all had those beautiful translucent wings.

“This is unbelievable.” Jessie covered her mouth, her eyes filling with tears. She trembled with excitement and awe.

“Oh, no. You must believe in us. We are very real. Let me show you around.” She took Jessie’s hand and they started walking. “Would you care to fly instead?”

*I’m dreaming, she thought. Yes, this is definitely a dream. I’ve flown in dreams before, she thought. I can do this.*

“Yes! I want to fly!” She said as any fear dropped away and turned to joy.

Umbrielle and another faerie, a young male with white hair and grey eyes, took both of her arms and then lifted her into the air. "Hello," he said, grinning. "I am Devon. Ready?"

*This is incredible.*

She laughed with pure delight. She was the bird from her daydreams, soaring through the air, floating above the earth, twisting through sunlight, the wind rushing through her hair, lifting her body. She looked down and saw hundreds of faeries. They flew from the highest tree branches, from bushes heavy with golden flowers, and from sun bright meadows. It was magical; a world full of shimmering light and deep green shadow. A world of wonder and happiness. A world teeming with life. When Jessie looked down, she saw beautiful homes made of wood, leaves, twigs and moss. Fields of blazing color. In the hazy distance, as the forest gave way to green sloping hills and meadows, cut through by snaking sun-white streams, a tall ivy-covered tower, circled by buildings and gardens, stood on the edge of a sky-mirrored lake. Umbrielle and Devon descended gently to the ground near the tower. Jessie realized it wasn't just a tower but a castle with a surrounding village.

"This is our home. Do you like it?" Umbrielle asked proudly. "It is called *Faelinn*."

"It's . . . beautiful. More beautiful than I could have ever imagined!"

She couldn't help but stare. Faeries were going about their business, some driving silver-maned ponies pulling small wagons full of brightly colored woven cloth, or pansies and lady slippers, others walked toting buckets of water and elderberries, or armfuls of grapevine, and above them all, like iridescent dragonflies, faeries flitted through the warm air.

Jessie turned to Umbrielle and Devon. She searched their eyes. "Please . . . don't let this be a dream. Please. That would be so cruel."

Umbrielle touched Jessie on the arm, her eyes wide and full of concern. "No, Jessie, this is real. You must believe this is the most real thing you have ever known. What does your heart tell you?" She caressed Jessie's face. "Oh, Jessie, can you not feel me? We have lived here since the dawn of time. Since the birth of light and darkness. We have been with you and your kind from the beginning. We shared so much, once. You believed in us and that belief was our bond."

Devon sighed. "Many in your world stopped believing ages ago," he said softly. "The Veil of the Worlds grew stronger. We turned away from each other. We grew wary of each other. Sacred touch places, for both of us, fell to ruin, fell to fear, and then hidden behind ignorance. Forgotten. Even now, the light from Raven's End is fading from your world, soon to be lost forever."

"Lost? How? Who would do such a thing?"

"There is a storm coming, Jessie. Did you not feel it? They do not know."

They do not remember. They don't know we are here."

"How can you stop it? It has to be stopped!"

Devon smiled though his eyes grew bright with tears. "Some say it is the way of the world. Others say we must fight. Perhaps there is another way."

Umbrielle held out her slender hand and Jessie took it, feeling a rush of sorrow and love. There was something else as well, a brief spark of hope. "Come, let's meet my friends."

For the remainder of the day, Jessie wandered through the village. The faeries she met, after some shyness and hesitation, all embraced her with excitement and joy. They took turns showing her around. They seemed so . . . Jessie realized they were all so intensely alive, so focused in their joy, in their daily activities.

Umbrielle brought her to a busy market square, lined with colorful awnings, under which tables offered fruits and sweet cakes and flowers. An older faerie wearing a blue cap bowed to them from behind one of the tables. He dipped a small tin cup into a wooden barrel. He smiled and offered the cup. Umbrielle nodded. "Try it."

Jessie took the cup. The liquid was golden and fizzed like soda. She sipped it and her eyes opened wide. "Wow," she said. "It's like the best thing I've ever

tasted. What is it?”

“Moonlight Fizz,” Umbrielle said. “Made from pure water, honey, elderberries, a drop of sunshine, and a pinch of moonlight—which gives it a good nose tickle. It is delightful, is it not? Kelda is the finest Fizz maker in all of Faelinn!”

Kelda smiled and touched a finger to his cap. “I hope it meets your approval, young miss!”

“It’s wonderful!”

Jessie thanked Kelda, who smiled bashfully at her. Umbrielle touched Jessie’s arm. “To the Common,” she said, leading on.

They came to an open space dominated by an oak tree. It was draped in colorful banners and wreaths. Faeries flew around it with ribbons, others sat beneath its shade, singing and dancing.

“Mother Oak,” Umbrielle said. “The first home and life giver. It has stood here since before the first of our kind.”

Devon bowed to Jessie. “I must be away.” He placed a hand over his chest. “Peace be with you, Jessie. It is an honor to have met you.” Then with a flick of his wings, he floated upwards and, waving, was off into the sunlight.

Umbrielle leaned close and whispered, "What do you see over there by Mother Oak?"

Jessie spotted a family. They seemed to be in a discussion with a young faerie. The child was talking to her parents and the parents seemed to consider the words carefully, even respectfully. There were no interruptions. There were no exclamations. They were genuinely listening. And they seemed to agree with whatever point the child was making. Jessie felt pangs of envy and sadness. She couldn't remember a conversation with her own parents without it ending in disappointment or tears. "You never listen to me!" How many times had she yelled that to her parents?

"Why are you so sad?" Umbrielle asked.

Jessie tried to smile but it faded quickly. She shrugged up her shoulders. "I've never really been heard," she said.

Umbrielle watched the faerie parents for a bit. "Your mother and father," she said. "Maybe they're doing the best they can. Maybe they were never heard as children as well. Maybe they feel like they are not being heard as adults. Maybe all of you need to learn to listen."

Jessie started to argue but stopped. She pictured her parents, saw their faces slowly turn to those of children; frustrated faces, angry faces, crying faces. She saw her own face in each of them. "Maybe," she whispered.

“We hear you,” Umbrielle said. “We have always heard you.”

Umbrielle guided her through the village on a tree-shaded pathway of weathered, smooth stones. They passed bright swaying fields of sunflowers and bluebells. At a crossroads, paths lead north to the castle, east to the edge of a great forest, and west toward the great snow-capped mountains. Where the paths met, stood an ancient moss covered well.

“It is the Well of Paths,” Umbrielle said. “Go ahead, gaze into it.”

Jessie gave Umbrielle an uncertain look but was put at ease by her smile. She leaned over the well’s edge and saw her own reflection in the dark, mirror-like water. A ripple passed through the reflection and Jessie’s face began to change, to grow older. Her hair was graying and her face thinner and creased by lines. But she was smiling, and then laughing. Jessie saw her older self standing in a garden with children dancing around her. The scene shimmered and her young reflection returned. All wide-eyed and full of question.

“Where is this?” Jessie said. “Is this my future?”

“Perhaps,” Umbrielle said, standing next to Jessie. “The future is not written yet. Perhaps this is but one future. A future you can create.”

Jessie noticed Umbrielle’s reflection, which remained the same. “What

about you?"

Umbrielle stared down at her unchanging reflection. "It works differently on the Fair Folk," she said. "Time is not the same for us." She clapped her hands and twirled. "We should go back. You must be weary after seeing so many new and wonderful things."

# CHAPTER 7

## JESSIE AND THE PROMISE

*“It is here we will plant the Great Oak, and in time it will grow and with it, so shall our realm,’ she told her people as they stood tall among the heather and bluebells. ‘But only if our beliefs be worthy, and our hearts remain true.’” –A Fall of Stardust*

Umbrielle asked Jessie if she would like to spend the night at her cottage. She lived alone and welcomed the company. Jessie wondered if she ever got lonely. But then she thought: *How could anyone be lonely here?*

The faerie nodded, as if reading her thoughts: “I love living alone. But it is nice to have a visitor now and again. Especially such a special one.”

They came to a small thatched-roofed cottage, covered with thick wisteria, and surrounded by a wild garden of honeysuckles, bluebells, and morning glories. Through a green door, they entered a cozy candle-lit room filled with dried herbs hanging from the rafters, a small kitchen with a stone fireplace, table and chairs on one side, and a large down-filled bed across the way. On the floor by the door was a saucer of what looked like milk or cream.

“Oh, you have a cat?” Jessie asked.

Umbrielle laughed. “No, the cream is for the brownies.”

“You have brownies? I’ve read about them.” She looked about. “Are they here?”

“They are very shy. They only come out at night. You have to keep them fed with good cream or they turn a bit naughty. A hungry brownie is not very nice. They help us keep things clean and in order around the cottage.”

Jessie nodded, her eyes moving around the cottage warily. “I hope you have plenty of cream.”

Umbrielle lifted a pitcher from the kitchen table. “It is not a mistake I will make twice,” she said.

“Are there others like them?”

“Oh yes, there are pixies in the gardens, and hob-goblins in the forest, and sprites everywhere! They are very shy though. And far away to the north, up in the mountains are the Redcaps. Terrible creatures! But they rarely come south anymore. You need not worry about them!”

Jessie remembered the Redcaps from the books she'd read. Horrible little creatures with eagle-like talons and sharp teeth.

"You must be exhausted," Umbrielle said. "I will fix you cakes to eat and then you should sleep. The bed is all yours."

"Where will you sleep?" Jessie asked.

Umbrielle waved her hand casually. "We do not need much sleep. I will sit by the fireplace if I get tired."

As night filled the windows with soft darkness and Umbrielle busied herself in the kitchen, humming a tune, Jessie sat back against the bed, her eyes growing heavy.

"What makes me so special?" Jessie said. "All of this . . . so very familiar and yet so new. I really don't understand. . . ."

Umbrielle sat next to her and held her hand. "You are all special. Even those who do not believe. It is our greatest heartache and our greatest joy."

"What is?"

"The bond between us, faerie and human, is an ancient one. And we remember, even if your kind does not. You are born, you live, and then you die. As

a people you forget more and more as the ages pass. We cannot. We see the endless chain. We are immortal. It is a blessing and a curse.”

Jessie’s eyes opened wide. “Immortal? You don’t die? But you do age. I saw older faeries, like Kelda. Even children.”

Umbrielle’s face lowered into shadow. “We can die, that is true, but only if we are hurt badly enough or become sick. And we do age but not like you. You are like brilliant shooting stars that last but a moment in our time, so full of color and life, so full of passion and vitality, burning fiercely across the night and falling like stardust. We are the night, unchanging in our rhythms season after season, the wheeling stars, the eternal cycle of the Goddess. The earth changes. We remain the same.”

“Is that why the Well of Paths didn’t show you changing?”

“Perhaps,” Umbrielle said. “And yet there are some mysteries that remain even beyond me.”

Jessie remained silent for a long time. She thought about her *Oma Doris* . . . who spoke to her flowers, to the birds, to the clumsy bumblebees. *She understood*, Jessie realized. *She believed*. And then she died. Gone. Leaving empty rooms. An empty house. A deserted garden. Leaving a coldness more bitter than any winter.

“I don’t want to die,” Jessie whispered.

Umbrielle touched Jessie’s face gently, her large emerald eyes searching through the sadness, the fear. “You have a soul. You will never die, not really. You are the spark of love, created by the Goddess, and it will never diminish, never fade.

We have no souls, Jessie. We are the essence of creation but not its fulfillment. We are the guardians of life and magic, but not their inheritors. I know you may not understand this, but no matter. In time you will. Now, time to sleep.”

Jessie pondered her words, feeling herself sinking oh so slowly into a beautiful twilight full of shooting stars. Somewhere in the night, she awoke to the sound of dishes clattering and she thought she saw little people wearing brightly colored caps flitting about the kitchen. “Brownies,” she muttered sleepily. She caught a glimpse of Umbrielle, covered by a shawl, gently rocking in her chair. Her eyes were closed but she was smiling in the glow of the fireplace. Jessie yawned and fell back to dreaming.

\* \* \*

Jessie dreamed of sun-dappled light through rustling leaves, of flying through towering cloud-mountains, of dancing in the silvery light of a full moon. She dreamed of laughter. She dreamed of weeping. She dreamed of a love that held her in an ocean of warmth and peace.

Jessie woke to the sound of rain outside. She could hear the *pitter-patter* on the roof. The *tip-tap* on the windows. And she thought, for a moment, how strange. Summer's Land seemed like a place where the sun always shined.

Umbrielle appeared and laughed. "It is raining! We are being nourished with the joyful tears of the Goddess!"

Jessie smiled, rubbing the sand from her eyes and giving herself a good slow stretch. "Can you read my mind?"

"I can read your heart," Umbrielle said. "Now, come on, lazy bones! We have much to do today!"

"I thought I saw brownies last night," Jessie said. "In the kitchen."

"Of course," Umbrielle said. "And they did a right good job too!"

Umbrielle spent the day showing her more of the village. They drank dark, sweet tea, made out of wild cherry bark and lemon balm, and ate more of those wonderful cakes by the lake. They sang songs. And they laughed all the time. *This is heaven*, Jessie thought. *Or what heaven should be.*

It was a sound that caught Jessie's attention. A low, deep, far off rumble. She searched the sky, thinking maybe it was only thunder. And then she noticed a darkness spreading above the mountains far to the west. The sound intensified; a

hurtful, cold noise that seemed to vibrate through the air and through her body. Jessie noticed the faeries around her stopping in mid activity and staring in the direction of the hurtful noise.

“What is it?” she asked Umbrielle, who shivered and hugged herself.

“The bridge between worlds is falling,” she said. “Another sacred place between our worlds is being destroyed.” She grabbed Jessie’s arm. “We have to find Queen Caelia. You have to go back before it is too late.”

“What do you mean? I don’t want to go back! Who is destroying the sacred place? I don’t understand!” Jessie began to panic as Umbrielle pulled her along the path bordering the lake.

“People!” Umbrielle said. “They bring their machines and kill the trees and dig up the wildflowers and force the animals to run. They bring noise and smoke and turn the waters into poison. And soon another part of the Veil becomes a wall that we cannot pass through . . . and you cannot cross.”

“No! Who are these people? Can’t we stop them? This can’t be happening!” Jessie shouted. “Why?” But Umbrielle didn’t answer her.

As they hurried toward the castle, the faeries stood silent along the path, their heads bowed. Jessie felt a growing uneasiness, a cold stone growing in her stomach. This didn’t feel right. Kit the fox appeared and stopped in front of them,

her eyes bright with anger.

“Umbrielle! You must tell her! You must show her!”

Jessie turned to the faerie girl with confusion. “What is going on?”

Umbrielle shook her head. “I cannot.”

“You must!” Kit showed her sharp white teeth. “She must see the truth! She has to know. Please! Enough of this trickery! I learned my lesson and now you all must learn yours!”

Jessie grew even more frightened. Umbrielle seemed to be struggling with herself; a great battle raged within, her face twisted with pain. She grabbed Jessie by the shoulders and looked deeply into her eyes. “What you see is what we want you to see,” she said. “We never meant to trick you. We wanted to show you how we used to be. When the earth was young and belief was strong. I am so sorry.”

Umbrielle kissed Jessie’s forehead and everything changed. The warm greenness of the land seeped away, like a color photograph slowly turning black and white. Summer turned to the waning light of late fall and the forest around them stood stark and bare, their branches black against a cold pale sky. The faeries, their once fine, rich garments were now ragged and tattered. Patched. Ancient shadows of their former glory. Their fine ageless faces seemed stretched and thin and gray. The village in the distance, the tall castle looming above,

overgrown with weeds and dying ivy. The walls cracked and crumbled. Mother Oak withered and nearly leafless, ribbons and banners hanging listless and faded from her branches.

Jessie screamed out, "No!" She fell to her knees. "This isn't true! This isn't . . . why? Why did you do this?" Jessie pulled away from Umbrielle's hand. "You're no different from all the rest! You lied to me! You gave me hope and then took it away!"

A crowd of frightened faeries parted as Caelia approached.

Jessie glared at the queen. "You! You did this! Why? This is so cruel!"

Caelia, her twilight blue dress now faded to winter gray, her beautiful golden hair now the dullness of dead straw, knelt before the weeping girl. She looked to Umbrielle and Kit with sternness in her eyes.

"You both are mistaken," she said. "There has been no glamour since Jessie arrived. What you are showing her is false, the mirror of glamour. The reflection of your own despair and fading belief."

Umbrielle touched her mouth with a trembling hand. "How is this possible?"

"Jessie believes. Truly. She may be a little child but her heart is very large."

Caelia smiled at Jessie and wiped the tears from her eyes.

“Jessie, please understand. We are fading, but we will not fade completely if there is but one who still believes. That’s why I brought you here. To let you, and us, know that there is more to life than what you see. That everything is connected. All of us. You need to believe in us, yes, but more importantly, you need to believe in yourself. Your dreams. Your sense of belonging. The importance of being who you are and not becoming broken and disillusioned. You need to keep believing in love. You need to keep your wonder. Your delight in all things. You need to keep these alive and share them with others. This is not about saving my world. It is about saving both our worlds.”

Caelia stood and held out her hands, palms up. “This is real, Jessie. The magic is real. It is inside of you. It is what binds you to all of life, to all of us.”

Jessie took her hands, felt the warmth flowing through them, reaching her wounded heart, embracing it with strength and acceptance. “Let me see it again, she said. “Please, let me see the beauty and the joy again. Let me see the magic one more time.”

“You have the power to see it for yourself,” Queen Caelia said. “Look through the eyes of belief and love. Look with your heart. Through such, no enchantment or glamour is needed.”

Jessie closed her eyes. She felt her heart open wide. Warm tears of love and acceptance crawled down her cheeks. She felt as if a great cold weight had lifted from her shoulders. She opened her eyes and all the color and wonderment and living magic burst into existence around her. Caelia stood tall in her twilight blue dress, her hair spun gold in the warm sky. All around her, faeries again wore their finest garments, the land shining with the deep green of early summer.

“It is so beautiful,” Jessie whispered. “Like waking from a dream.”

“Come, Jessie,” Caelia said. “We must return you to your world.”

“I don’t want to go back.”

Caelia reached out for her but Jessie remained still. “You cannot stay here,” she said softly. “Not yet. There is something you must do. Someone who needs your help.”

“Who? How can I help someone?”

“You will know when the time comes.”

Caelia held out her hand. Reluctantly, Jessie took it and was flooded by such bitter-sweetness. Such terrible longing.

“You came to us like the sun through a storm,” Caelia whispered. “You

showed us that our worlds are but a part of something greater, and that what you've always felt within your heart is true and good and forever. No matter what happens, you will always remember who you are. You are a child of the earth and a child of magic. Within you is the strength and courage to believe when all others have turned away. Believe, Jessie, believe in all the little wonders and be joyful."

Jessie wept at these words. She embraced the queen tightly. "I'll never see you again . . ."

Caelia kissed her cheek. "Remember, Jessie, you are a bridge. You have always been a bridge between our worlds. In the dark of dreams, in the silvery light of the rising moon, in the racing clouds of a summer's sky, in the deepness of your heart, we will be there. We have always been there. I promise."

They rose up together. All around them faeries had gathered and began to sing. A low chiming of glass bells that rose gently into a warm and loving sound. Kit the fox came to her and rubbed against her legs, her large green eyes filled with tears.

Umbrielle embraced her. "I am so sorry," she said. "I did not know." She held out a finely crafted silver necklace, from which a small feather dangled, and placed it around Jessie's neck. "Never forget."

"It is time," Caelia said.

Jessie shook her head. She reached out to the queen. “No! I don’t want to—”

And then Caelia was gone. They were all gone. And Jessie found herself falling into darkness, and the only sound she heard was the breaking of her heart.

\* \* \*

Jessie woke with a start in the darkness. She could see, faintly, the stars through the branches overhead. She was alone. The forest surrounded her like silent, black giants. Panic gripped her and then a heartbreaking sorrow. It was all gone. The meadow. The waterfall. The bridge. Umbrielle. Kit. Caelia. She was right back where she started. There was her bike against the tree. Her backpack was in the same spot where she had left it.

She wept hard, her body heaving with each sob. *It was all a dream, she thought. Just a cruel dream.*

She reached into the backpack and brought out the book. She stared through her tears at the cover. Faeries dancing and playing all under a summer’s sky. All lies. A trick of the mind. A stupid dream. “I hate you!” she yelled, throwing the book with all of her might. It tumbled through the brush and landed with a thump. “I wish I’d never read you!”

Jessie was cold. Bone cold. She shivered, her teeth chattering, and she

wrapped her arms tightly around her chest. She rocked back and forth, feeling so ancient, so empty, and so lonely. From somewhere to her left, she could hear faint beeping and the muffled rumble of engines. A faint breeze brought the odor of diesel exhaust and the smell of rich, freshly turned earth. Whatever it was, Jessie knew it wasn't a good thing. It might even be a terrible thing.

"What am I going to do?" she said to the night. "I don't want to go home."

Jessie heard a branch snap in the darkness. She jerked her head up and stared into the night. She held her breath. Through the trees and brush, a light bobbed up and down. Someone was approaching. *Should I run?* Jessie's mind raced. *Should I hide?* She looked wildly about. *Where would I hide?*

She heard a voice. A man's voice. "What's this doing here? No way to treat a book."

A bright light swept over her, stopped, and then returned to shine on her face. Jessie held up a hand, squinting. Her heart pounded. She tensed, ready to run into the darkness.

"Did you drop this old thing? Or making a literary criticism?" The man waved the book at her.

The figure came closer, saw the tears on her face, and moved the flashlight away. "Hey, are you okay?" The voice was breathless, as if he'd been in a hurry. He

bent over for a moment. She could hear him breathing hard. "I gotta get in shape," he said. He straightened up, held out a hand and waved it slightly. "Okay. Yeah, I'm okay."

Jessie watched the struggling man and thought: *I can outrun him.*

"What are you doing out here? I mean, yeah, what am I doing out here, too?" He shook his head and snorted. Jessie drew away from the man. "Oh, hey, no . . . I'm not going to hurt you. I mean it seems, you know, like one of those bad things but I assure you, I'm cool." He took off his glasses and wiped his face, which was glistening with sweat. "Stumbling around in a dark forest and having a heart attack cool, that is."

Jessie didn't know what to make of the man. Was he crazy? No, not crazy. Different. Maybe he was autistic, like her brother Bobby.

The man opened the book and played the flashlight over the inside cover. "It says this belongs to the library of someone named Jessie. Might that be you?"

She nodded, and then said, "Who are you?"

The man laughed. It was a good laugh, warm and sincere. "Good question. Straight to the heart of the matter!"

Jessie took a sharp breath. He seemed familiar. Where had she seen this

man before? Her eyes grew very wide. *On the back of every book. Younger then but not so changed.* “You’re—”

The man shone the light over his own face. A bearded, older face, kind with smiling eyes and spreading crow’s feet. He wore a sweat-stained Boston Red Sox ball cap. He pushed up his glasses with a finger. He held out the book. “Hello Jessie,” he said with a slight bow. “Larry Boswell, at your service!”

# CHAPTER 8

## JESSIE AND A TALE OF LOST MAGIC

*“It is true,’ Rhimar the Bard sang. ‘And sad, but the great old warrior had lost his way. His sword broken. His armor rusted. His heart lost among the graves of his fallen brothers. What life was left to live? What will was left to go on?’” –A Fall of Stardust*

Jessie stared at the man. Her most favorite writer. The author of all those wonderful books. And he was standing in front of her in the middle of the forest! Jessie didn't know what to think anymore. *Is he real? Am I still asleep? How can he be here? I've really been having the strangest time!* Finally, because it was the only thing she could think of to say, she blurted out, “Why did you stop writing?”

Larry Boswell nodded, as if it was the second best question he'd heard all day. “Yep, another excellent question. One my agent is dying to have answered!” He moved closer and eased himself to the pine needle covered ground with a grunt and a crackle of knees. “Yeah, these old legs are not what they used to be. Just gonna sit here a spell.” He clicked off the flashlight, leaving them in darkness. As Jessie's eyes adjusted to the night, she watched as he glanced around, and then craned his head up at the trees and a sprinkling of stars peeking through the high

pine branches. It was unnaturally quiet except for a slight breeze rustling through the forest and the distant sounds of beeping and roaring engines.

“You hear that too? Soundtrack for the modern age,” he said with a sigh. He gazed off into the night, pondering the sounds. He turned back to Jessie. “Anyway, back to that all-around excellent original question that I asked. What are you doing out here in my old woods? Or what’s left of it anyway.”

“Why did you?” Jessie said again, being persistent. “You know, stop writing?” Then she thought: *Am I being rude?*

*And why did he call this “his woods?”*

“And what do you mean, ‘my old woods’?”

“Long story, both. I’ll tell you in a bit.” He fumbled at something at his side and brought out a water bottle. He offered it to her. “Thirsty? It’s good spring water. A little warm perhaps.”

Jessie hesitated. A reaction instilled in her by countless horror stories about strangers offering things. But then, she told herself, this is Larry Boswell. Not quite a stranger. And more than that, she was, like her mom used to say, parched. *Mom*. She thought about her parents. Felt a pang of guilt well up. She wondered if they missed her. If they were frantic with worry. *Stop it!* She turned her mind back to the present and reached out for the bottle. She drank the liquid, spilling a bit on

her shirt, and it was wonderful—not warm at all, cool and delicious.

“Sorry,” she said, as she handed back the bottle. It was nearly empty. “I didn’t mean to drink so much of it.”

“Hey, you were thirsty. Not a problem.”

They sat in silence. It wasn’t an awkward silence. More like two tired old friends taking a rest. Jessie lay back against a tree trunk and watched the stars above, cold points of light shifting through branches and leaves. She drifted back to everything, back to nothing, back to her dream. It was like opening a door to a room once cherished, now left empty, cold, and filled with long shadows. Filled with ghosts. Jessie could feel the night draw closer and the air hung heavy with words unspoken, conflicting thoughts welling up but left unexpressed. Finally, Jessie spoke. There was so much more trailing behind the words, but she stopped, feeling a great weariness at the effort.

“I ran away.”

Larry didn’t say anything. She heard him breathing softly. He cleared his throat. “That bad, huh?”

“I needed to get away. I guess I really didn’t get very far,” Jessie said. A voice in her head whispered, *but you thought you’d gotten very far away, didn’t you?*

Larry chuckled softly. "Sometimes it's not about how far, but where you end up." He clicked the flashlight and moved the beam of light in a circle, trees and long shadows danced around them. Off to the right, the reflectors on her bike glowed red like animal eyes. "Your bike?" he asked. Jessie nodded. "Looks like a Schwinn. Had one when I was a kid, too. Good bike. Lasts forever."

"Why are you out here?" Jessie said. "You run away too?"

Larry laughed. "Yeah! Ran away! Story of my life!" He got up slowly, hand against a tree trunk, his knees popping again. "Come on, I want to show you something. It's not a wonderful thing but it's important." He held out his hand. When she made no move to take it, he shrugged and lowered the hand. "It's okay. You can follow me."

She watched as Larry clicked on the flashlight, sweeping the beam around the forest floor. He turned his head back to Jessie. "Coming?"

Jessie walked behind him as he picked his way carefully through the brush, his flashlight moving slowly in a small arc. "Ah, there's the path," he said.

Soon, they were walking side by side through the forest. Ahead, the noises she had heard earlier were growing closer.

Larry stopped for a moment. "I've tried to stop it, you know. Wrote letters. Started petitions." He sighed. "Didn't do any good. How do you fight a billion

dollar operation?”

“What operation? What’s happening?”

“This,” he said, pointing the flashlight ahead.

The forest opened before them and Jessie saw the flashlight’s beam reflect dully off a tall chain-link fence. Beyond, down a gentle slope and some distance away, machines with yellow and white lights were crawling through flood-lit mounds of earth, their engines spewing black smoke and roaring like dinosaurs. High above, silhouetted cranes with blinking lights swung against the diluted night sky. Jessie was overwhelmed by the smell of pine pitch, diesel fumes, and overturned earth.

Jessie stumbled through the high grass until stopped by the fence. Her fingers gripped the cold links, shaking them. The big “NO TRESPASSING” sign clanked above her head. “No! No! Why are they doing this? They’re destroying the forest! They’re killing the trees!”

Larry stood next to her in silence. He turned away and slid down the fence, his clothes stuttering against the chain links until he was sitting, head bowed.

He started to talk, slowly at first, then with gathering speed and force. “I grew up in the area, you know? It’s all changed now.” He stopped, craned his head upwards and stared at the night sky. “This was my wood, or so I claimed when I

was a kid. Boswell's Wood. I spent every free minute I could exploring the forest. It was my enchanted world. My magical kingdom."

Jessie knelt next to him, wiping at her eyes. "What happened?"

Larry chuckled but it wasn't a happy chuckle. It sounded defeated. Sad. "For one brief moment, in the summer of my 14th year, I had found somewhere to belong. Someplace to believe. I thought it was real. I thought I had finally come home. But . . . it was all a dream, I guess. A child's dream. And then my family moved away to New Mexico. Years later I wound up in California, that's where I live now. I haven't been back here in over thirty years. I figured I would say goodbye before it's all gone."

Jessie felt his sorrow and it twined with her own. Her new dream. His old dream. She felt his loss. It was her loss as well.

"You stopped writing," Jessie said, and then she paused. A sudden thought dawned on her. And she knew it was the truth. "You stopped writing about this place. All those books were about this place."

Larry turned his head. He looked at her with something approaching amazement. "That's pretty insightful for a kid. But yeah . . . you're absolutely right. I had it, you know, inside for a while." He thumped his chest. "A wonder. An awe. An incredible joy. I was so alive back then. But as time and distance increased, it all began to fade away. I wrote it all down as best as I could, trying to save some

part of it, trying not to lose the feelings. In the end, the gas tank went empty. I couldn't write anymore. And now I've forgotten most of it. I'm down to cold ash now. Looking back, my life now seems like a slow death. A life of endless grieving. Coming here only confirms it."

"But you brought joy to a lot of people," Jessie said. "To me! I love your books. They've helped me through some tough times. They gave me hope."

Larry sighed. "They feel like lies now. False hopes. Distractions. I've spent my life on a fool's errand, no? Drifting through the world without any real attachment to anyplace or anyone. Failed marriages. No children. Nothing to call my own except for the writing. And now I don't even have that. The real pain, the greatest sorrow, is that I no longer believe in anything."

Jessie listened to his words and struggled with her own disbelief. She fought against all the dark thoughts, the feelings of disappointment like a million pounds pressing down on her body. The same old bitterness, the same old self-defeating words. *No more!* She raged at the weight. *I don't choose this anymore!*

Warmth blossomed against her neck like a ray of sunlight against her skin. Startled, she touched metal, felt the feather. *Umbrielle's gift!* Bright, warm images of Summer's Land flashed into her mind. The faces of Caelia and Umbrielle and all the rest. She felt an excitement stir in her stomach, building in force, reaching up with warm hands that embraced her heart. She heard Caelia's voice, as clear as day: "There is something you must do. Someone who needs your help."

It wasn't a dream. She was sure of it. It was real. It really happened. And here was someone who needed help.

*I believe*, Jessie said in her mind, using it like a blinding sword to cut through the encroaching darkness. *I believe*.

"I had a dream," Jessie whispered slowly, feeling her body tremble.

Larry remained silent.

"But it wasn't a dream. Just like yours wasn't a dream."

Larry looked at her intently. Beyond them, the ugly sounds of construction seemed to lessen, as if they had moved farther away.

"Something happened to you when you were a kid. Something right here. In Boswell's Wood. Something so incredible that it only seemed like a dream."

Jessie searched his face, watching as it softened, as it appeared to grow younger. She saw confusion, his eyes moving rapidly side to side, searching, and then they stopped with dawning recognition; a long lost remembrance emerging, carefully, timidly, throwing off years of crippling doubt. He made a soft noise and struggled to stand. "No," he said in a hoarse whisper and walked off into the dark, leaving Jessie alone.

*What have I done?* Jessie thought, feeling panic grip her mind. She listened to Larry stumble through the brush and then silence. Jessie shivered, stared hard into the night. *What if he had a heart attack? What if he gets lost in the darkness? What if he doesn't come back?*

It felt like hours, but it could have been only minutes, and then she heard him approach. He knelt down beside her, his face pale in the glow from the construction site. He'd been crying.

"Oh, God," he whispered after a long moment. "How?" His hands covered his face. "No, I made it up. It was just a child's fantasy. Made out of my loneliness. My fear." He lowered his hands and stared at Jessie, his eyes wide and bright. "Tell me! It happened to you, didn't it? You saw it too! It wasn't my imagination. You—"

"Yes!" Jessie clapped her hands and laughed. "Yes! Yes! It really happened!"

Larry rose up, shaking. And then he was laughing with her. "I do remember! How could I have forgotten? I was right here, on the edge of Boswell's Wood and then it all became different! The forest changed. A meadow filled with flowers and mountains far off on the horizon. I remember! This big old raven came swooping over me and led me to a flooded meadow where I saw everything—all my early memories. And then she came across the pond. The most beautiful lady I'd ever seen!"

“Queen Caelia,” Jessie said. She rushed to the man and held him tight.

Larry embraced her; two kindred souls lost in a spell of beautiful wonder. All about them, the world shifted, melted away, the fence disappeared and the sounds of machines faded. Larry and Jessie looked out over a night hushed meadow, crowned by an ocean of stars. Slowly, rising beyond the jagged teeth of faraway mountains, a full moon flooded the land with reaching, silken light.

“Do you believe again?” Jessie asked as the sky became streaked by shooting stars.

But even as it all appeared, the moonlight began to waver and the meadow grew dark, and the fence and the sounds of construction returned. Larry choked back sobs. “Do you?”

“Forever,” Jessie said. “I will believe forever.”

“Write it all down,” Larry said. He nodded quickly. “It all needs to be told. Promise me?” He started to grin. “You know what? We will write the story together! Yes!”

Jessie held out her hand. “I promise.” Larry shook her hand and began to laugh again.

“This is so strange,” he said. “All these years and it all comes down to now.

Here. And you being here? Like it was always meant to be. I feel so . . . I don't know anymore. Everything's changed. And yet, everything is still the same. Have I changed? I'm still me." He slapped his chest. "It's like the child I was and the man I am, are together again after a very long and painful absence. Amazing!"

"I'm still me, too," Jessie said. "But better, I think." She gripped the fence again and shook it. "What about this? Can't we stop this? They're tearing apart our special place."

Larry stared through the fence. "I don't think it matters anymore. Not now. Not here. It's never really been about certain places, right? Not about what's out there." He tapped his heart. "It's about what's in here. That's our special place. I remember Queen Caelia telling me that it was inside."

"The bridge," Jessie said.

"Yes. The bridge." Larry closed his eyes and faced the fence. "Goodbye," he whispered to the night, to the stars above, to Boswell's Wood. He looked over at Jessie. "Well? Ready to go home? I bet your parents are out of their minds with worry. How long have you been out here?"

"I don't know. I left Saturday morning."

Larry glanced at his watch, pushed a button to light up the numbers. "It's 10 p.m., Saturday night."

“Are you sure? Feels like a lot longer.” Jessie said. “It all happened in a day?”

“Magic,” Larry said. “Come on, I’ll drive you home. Your bike will fit in the back of my car.”

# CHAPTER 9

## JESSIE'S PURPOSE

*"It's only the little things we know against the world turning into darkness, but these little things, once gathered, are enough to stop the turning of the world." –A Fall of Stardust*

They drove back through the town in silence, both deep in thought. Jessie rested the side of her face against the cool window and gazed out at the passing streets, sodium vapor street lamps creating islands of pooled light, warm yellow lights from houses deep in shadow, the sweeping windshield glare of oncoming cars—all of it so familiar and yet oddly strange. This was her world, not as she would like it to be, but as it was. It was a world of seemingly contradictory things. A world of great beauty. A world of great ugliness. A world without hope. A world full of hope. Fear. Joy. Happiness. Sorrow. A big crazy jumbled-up mix. But maybe the world is what you make of it, what you bring to it . . . .

Larry drummed his fingers on the steering wheel as he drove. And then it stopped. He took a quick glance at her.

"How did I get so damn lost? Why did I forget?" he said. "How could I forget so much beauty?"

Jessie searched her feelings. Thought about her own struggles to be understood, to be accepted as herself. She wondered if the world had become a place where wonder and magic were no longer accepted and encouraged. A garden where the soil had become poisonous. A world that considered such things as childish. Foolish. To grow up in this world you had to slowly die to all the magic. But she also felt in her heart that there was another way. Hold on to the magic with a fierce desire, share it with others who are seeking, let them know there are places safe from the cold sharp edges of the world. In his own way, as lost as he thought he was, Larry Boswell, before he stopped writing, had been doing just that. She was living proof.

“Your books,” she said. “Don’t you see how many you’ve helped? They’re connections. Thousands of connections. And we need them, to keep ourselves from letting the world suck out all the beauty in our hearts.”

Larry pondered her words, made a clucking sound with his tongue and hit the steering wheel hard. “It’s difficult, I guess,” he said. “Look around. The everyday craziness of living. The frenzy of getting from here to there becomes so normal. And then we realize it’s not where we want to be after all. We think it’s meaningful, important, even desirable, but in the end it’s pretty damn empty. The sheer enormity of being bombarded with so much noise and confusion and fear keeps us hunkered down like rabbits hiding from a hawk. We’re all so bundled up tightly, near-sighted, chewing up the world before it chews us up.”

“But here we are,” Jessie said. “I think I’m beginning to understand that

magic has always been in the little spaces, in the little moments of every day. You know? It's like in the silence between thoughts, in acts of kindness, in drawing a picture or writing a song. It's dancing under the stars or catching snow on your tongue. Hugging someone. That's where the magic lives. It's the best part of us."

"The simple things," Larry said, shaking his head. "Things most people no longer have time for. We've become so self-absorbed. So self-protective. Actually, it's a wonder I remembered anything at all. Did I miss the signs? Were there any reminders over the years? I've had dreams, sure, but I passed them off as merely dreams. And even they became rare. I've seen some odd things now and again, and over time I filed them all away as tricks of the mind. How can anything as fragile as magic exist here? How can it survive among the homeless shivering under the overpass? Among the hungry and the sick? What's magic to those who are scared and full of despair?"

"It's not fragile," Jessie said. She felt transfixed. Filled with a new sense of purpose. The words she spoke flowed out of her effortlessly and she didn't know where they came from: "It's not some fantasy wave of a wand or a spell that needs the right words. It's not about some childish fantasy all filled with sweetness and unicorns. It's part of nature. It's always been a part of life and it's still here. It heals. It comforts. It keeps the night from becoming endless. We have to remember this. We have to share this knowledge. We need . . . we need to make it okay to believe again."

“Where did that all come from?” Larry said with a big grin. “Are you sure you’re only 13 years old?”

“It’s magic,” she said, laughing. And then her face grew serious for a moment. “I don’t feel like I’m 13 years old. Not anymore. It’s strange but I feel both younger and older.”

“It’s not going to fade away, is it? Not like before,” Larry said in a hushed voice, like a child expecting the worst but hoping for the best.

“We need to keep it alive every day,” she said with conviction. “We have to write and make connections. We have to tell people, kids, that it’s okay and normal and safe to believe in all the wonders of life. To believe in what’s possible. We have to show them. Teach them.”

“I will,” Larry said.

“We will,” Jessie said and held up her hand for a high five. They both shouted “Yeah!” as their palms smacked together.

The car slowed to a stop about a block from Jessie’s house. Larry put it in park. “You should go on by yourself,” he said.

“But—” Jessie began to protest.

“This is your time, you and your parents. I’ll be a big distraction. I don’t want to get in the way, okay?”

Jessie nodded. “I’m not going to see you again.” It came out as a statement but in her mind it was a question.

“You’ll see me again,” Larry said. “We have a book to write, remember?” He reached into his back pocket and brought out a small notebook. He clicked a pen from his shirt pocket and scribbled on a page. “My address. My email address. My phone number. We’ll stay in touch, Jessie. I promise. Now help me get your bike out.”

As they stood next to her bike, Jessie blinked away tears. She hugged him. As he leaned down, she gently kissed his cheek. “Thank you,” she said. “Thank you for your books. Thank you for believing.”

“No, thank you, Jessie. Thank you for finding my magic.”

“What are you going to do now?” Jessie asked.

Larry grinned. “I’m going to live!”

Jessie watched as Larry got back in the car and made a u-turn. She watched until the red taillights of the car disappeared into the night. Then she took a deep breath, mounted the bike, and began to pedal home.

# CHAPTER 10

## JESSIE RETURNS HOME

*“Alisandra embraced her queen. The quest had been completed and the Veils had been pierced. ‘There is nothing to compare to seeing the warm, tallow glow of home from a far distance,’ she told her mother. ‘Especially on a path leading away from the toils and loneliness of a long and uncertain journey.’”*  
—A Fall of Stardust

It was near midnight when Jessie came pedaling down her shadow-lined street. She spotted a police car at her house.

Jessie coasted her bike into the driveway. A neighbor, Mrs. Hudson, spotted her and called out her name. The front door of Jessie’s house opened. Her mother and father, followed by a police officer, rushed out of the house.

“Jessie!” They both screamed in unison and squeezed her so hard she thought she would break.

A hot pang of guilt rushed through Jessie. They both looked so scared. *I did this*, she thought. *I scared them*. Days ago, she would have felt some small sense

of vindication. Some small twist of a cruel knife. It hadn't been hate. More like a misguided scream for help. But not now. Not this . . . .

"Where did you go? We were both so worried." Her dad searched her face, kissed her forehead. There were tears in his eyes. She had never seen her father like this. And it hurt her heart.

"We were so afraid that something bad happened to you!" her mom said, crying openly. She held Jessie's face in both hands. "Please don't ever do this again!"

Jessie shook her head. "Nothing bad happened," she said, hugging her parents tighter. "Nothing bad at all."

A police officer came up to them, holding a notepad. She looked relieved. Too often incidents like this had a different ending.

"Are you okay?" the officer asked, glancing at her parents. "You went off on your own, right? Or did someone—"

"No, no," Jessie said, shaking her head. "I went for a bike ride to the park and got lost. But I found myself—"

"Jessie!" Bobby, rubbing sleep from his eyes, ran across the yard as fast as his little legs could carry him. He jumped into her arms, pressing his warm face

against her cheek. "I knew you okay! Been with faeries!"

"You know?" Jessie whispered in amazement. Bobby giggled, nodded his head.

"Sprinkles on you!" he says. "Like shiny snow all over."

Jessie laughed. "Stardust! I must be covered in stardust!"

While Jessie and Bobby were talking, the police officer closed her notebook and moved away. Jessie's parents followed her. They spoke briefly. The officer nodded, smiled, and shook hands with them both. She spoke into her shoulder mike and headed to her patrol car.

Jessie saw Mrs. Hudson standing on her porch next door, clutching her night robe closed. Across the street, the new neighbors, the Andersons, were huddled on their lawn, their figures silhouetted against the bright porch light behind him.

Jessie's mom took Bobby in her arms and her dad took Jessie's hand. "Come on, let's get inside." He gave a quick embarrassed glance at his neighbors and waved at them, as if signaling everything was okay. *Nothing to see, here folks!*

\* \* \*

Her mother came down the stairs after tucking Bobby back into bed. Jessie

and her dad sat on the couch in the family room. He kept asking her if she was all right. And Jessie kept nodding her head. "I'm fine dad. Really."

"You must be starving," her mom said, her hands rubbing along her thighs and then clasped in front of her chest. She smiled nervously. "How about a sandwich?"

"I'm good mom, thanks."

Her mom started to say something but stopped. She glanced briefly at her husband. "Jessie . . . is it so bad? So bad that you wanted to run away?" She sat down next to Jessie and turned to her daughter. "Talk to me, hon. Please."

"What did we do?" her father said and he looked so sad. "We only ever wanted the best for you. We love you. You do know that, right?"

Jessie wiped tears from her eyes and nodded. Her heart, once small and armored against an unending winter, now broke free, and the ache of this rebirth spread through her. A tide of love that filled everything and everyone. A joyful reaching out with the gentlest of hands through a soft, warm rain.

"I know," Jessie said. She hugged them both tightly. "I've been so lost. Hurt. *Oma* dying and then moving here . . . it's been so painful."

Jessie's mom kissed her cheek and held her tightly. "Oh baby, I know. It's

been painful for all of us. Sometimes, we all forget that we are all in this together. I'm so sorry, hon. Your dad and I . . . we've been too distracted, I know, dealing with everything. We've become too wrapped up in ourselves. Every little thing became a problem. It's hard to admit, but you became one of those problems. I think we all became lost for a bit."

Her dad ran his hand through Jessie's hair. He smiled sadly. "I wish to God that things had been different. I knew moving us down here was going to be hard but not like this. To me, it was the easiest way out. It wasn't like we had many other choices, or so I thought. Maybe it was the wrong choice . . ."

Jessie listened in silence. Listened with wonder. Her parents had never spoken about such things before. *They're like me*, she thought with such newfound clarity. *They struggle. They have doubts. They go through each day with equal parts hope, love, and fear.*

"You did what you thought best," Jessie said. "I understand. The world is sometimes too loud, too grabby, too bossy to ignore. Maybe not the real world, but the world we make for ourselves."

Jessie's dad slowly peered over her head and looked at his wife, his eyes wide. Her mom returned the look with a proud smile.

"Yes, Jessie," her dad said. "We forgot to focus on what's important."

“Family,” her mom said. “You must be exhausted. We’ll talk more in the morning. Get some sleep, hon.”

Jessie stood up with her parents and gave them a big hug. “I love you.”

\* \* \*

Jessie put her backpack down next to the small study desk. Her eyes slowly swept her room. The same old room, but different. Like her parents were the same but different. Like everything seemed the same but somehow changed.

*The world hasn’t changed one bit, she realized. But I have . . . .*

She reached out and touched Larry’s books. She knew such a lingering sweetness, such an overwhelming rightness to all of it—the books, the drawings and paintings of her secret heart, this place and time. Everything. *This is me*, she thought. *This will always be me.*

As she lay on her bed, her mind drifting through a kaleidoscope of images, she opened her eyes to the night. The darkness no longer held her in an icy grip of fear, the shadows stretching across the ceiling no longer threatened to drown her in helplessness.

*“In the dark of dreams, in the silvery light of the rising moon, in the racing clouds of a summer’s sky, in the deepness of your heart, we will be there. We have*

*always been there. I promise.”*

Jessie reached for her lamp and turned it on. She got up and sat down at her study. From a shelf above the desk, bookended by fantasy miniatures, she brought down a cloth-bound journal. Her mom had given it to her on her birthday, “Sometimes it’s good to write down your thoughts,” she had said. “It can help.”

The pages remained empty.

*“Write it all down. It all needs to be told. Promise me? You know what? We will write the story together!”*

Sitting in a small pool of light from the lamp, Jessie picked up a pen, and looked down at the first page. She closed her eyes for a moment. And then smiled.

At the top of the page, Jessie wrote: “LITTLE WONDERS.”

# EPILOGUE

## LITTLE WONDERS

*“Though the world becomes but knife-edged shadows, waiting ravenous in moonlit corners, whispering to an audience of memory and dust, our little wonders are enough to stop its endless hunger.”*  
—A Fall of Stardust

Winter had been long but spring was finally showing herself like a shy child peeking through her father’s legs. The last of the snows had melted and now the stream by the house was full and running free. Early green buds, like small knots, lined tree branches, and the first broad coltsfoot leaves showed along the stone walkway. Soon the days would be longer, warmer, and the robins would make their visits. This falling away of the cold and the slow turning of the earth toward the sun was her favorite time of the year. Summer was nice, all glorious sunshine, the thriving life of her gardens, the greening rustle of the woods, but this slow rebirth of spring held a special meaning for her. The cusp of a promise. Life and hope in an unending cycle of renewal.

Jessie stood on her back porch, her breath mingling white with the steam from her coffee. The air filled with the smell of damp earth. As she looked at the mist rising from the gardens and greenhouses, at the hazy woods in the distance,

a feeling of nostalgia swept over her. She touched her necklace, Umbrielle's feather, and the feeling increased.

*No, she thought. Not nostalgia. Maybe something more like wistfulness. Everything she'd ever wanted was here. A place of her own. A special place.*

"Little Wonders Sanctuary," she'd called it. Eighty acres set in a gentle sloping valley, embraced by deep woods, vibrant gardens, wildflower meadows, meandering streams, and a wide, sky-mirroring pond just beyond the trees. All bound by dark green hills sheltering the land from the harshest winds of winter.

It had been a long journey. One that had taken nearly 40 years. And many adventures along the way. But in some ways, she still felt so close to that 13-year-old girl, alone and lost on the edge of a dark forest. A confused and angry child on the doorstep of a wider, more accepting world. She had not forgotten. She remembered. And wrote it all down. As promised. Together with Larry Boswell, they told the story and more.

*Larry . . . .* Jessie sighed and put down her coffee cup on the porch railing. Somewhere out of sight, she heard the cawing of crows echoing across the hills. She thought of that old raven leading her from one memory to another, and she remembered again and again. The books flowed out of them (together and on their own). Larry, the man and writer, shed of his dead skin and shining with new purpose, his words embracing hers with such care, helping them dance, through the rain, into moonlight, spun out and lost among the stars. And the response had

been unexpected. The love and sheer joy of those who read their books had been a revelation. “Our belief,” she had once told Larry, “became their belief.”

Jessie recalled her own words, spoken on a night so long ago: *“We have to remember this. We have to share this knowledge. We need . . . we need to make it okay to believe again.”*

The letters they had received were heartbreaking and loving and so full of gratitude. “You speak for the silent, the lonely, the desperate, the unloved,” one reader wrote. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

They wrote an entire series together, starting with *Little Wonders*. Much to her parents’ astonishment, by the time she was 18, Jessie was already a beloved, if not an intensely private, author. She made few appearances at book signings and fantasy conventions with Larry—and for many years, none at all. It wasn’t that she felt embarrassed or even uncomfortable about seeing her fans—on the contrary, these fans meant everything to her. She didn’t feel ready to talk about all the things that tugged and pulled at her heart. There was all so much. An ocean of intensity. She burned with the need to reach out. But the writing always came first.

*The memories. The thoughts. The feelings. All the little wonders.*

Jessie’s dad passed away when she was 28. He’d lived long enough to see her success, to see her become a strong, beautiful, and compassionate woman.

Jessie saw his smile in her memories, always full and genuinely proud, his eyes on the verge of tears. She often wondered if her parents had thought the changes in her, after that night, would soon fade and the old angry and frightened Jessie would return. She never did.

*Her mom. Jessie shook her head. A frail and uncertain woman who had blossomed into a beautiful flower.*

Mom was still alive and living not 50 miles away, in the house Jessie had bought for her. Still active, still vibrant with a life full of friends and social gatherings and trips abroad. “There’s a big world out there,” she would say, “and I mean to see it all!”

Bobby, her brother, lived on a farming co-op in Colorado. He was the one who had never lost the magic. He was the one who always saw all the little wonders. The one who had never been a stranger to Summer’s Land.

*It’s all gone by so quickly, she thought. And so much of it is touched by a sense of time running out. Running away. Still so much to accomplish.*

Jessie thought of her husband, Joe, gone these past 10 years. Joe, who tried so hard in the beginning, who believed he was marrying a writer, a very popular writer to be sure, but there was another side of her, a part that was so hard to understand at first and it nearly drove him away. But in the end it all made so much sense.

“I knew you wrote this stuff but I didn’t know you also lived it!” he had told her years later with a laugh. “But thank the gods I didn’t listen to my doubts. And there were some big doubts!”

*According to Joe: You could not meet Jessie, much less love her, and not be changed. Not the change that comes with a demand or accusations, but a change that comes naturally because it’s as true as rain on a hot, dusty day.*

Eventually, they had three beautiful children, Caelia, Umbrielle, and Devon. Within the nurturing grounds of the Sanctuary, they grew from children into young adults with wisdom touching their eyes, and hearts ancient with love. And in return they gave her grandchildren, who visited often, their eyes always wide with delight, their laughter ringing across fields and through forests.

*The circle does not break, Jessie knew. It only grows larger.*

Though her books and paintings shaped the vessel of her belief, *Little Wonders Sanctuary* was her life-giving statement. Living, tangible proof of magic in a world fraught with fear and despair. She had searched for the perfect space in its perfect time and place—it’s no little coincidence that it was back in Pennsylvania that everything came together, and *Little Wonders Sanctuary* was born. And the years that followed were full of studies: botany, forestry, ecology, folklore, and much more. In time she gave talks at schools and libraries and began to invite school children and taught them about books, art, plants and animals,

and all the secrets of a nurturing life. She taught them to see beyond the ordinary, to be aware of the awesome beauty in everything. Most of all, it was a place for healing the heart and soul, for embracing the wounded, and loving the unloved.

She taught them to dance to the music of their own enchantment—to see all the small wonders through eyes struggling to stay awake. And once awake, there would be no more sleeping.

*The Well of Paths*, Jessie thought, remembering the reflected image. *It was the only path I could have taken, after all.*

Jessie watched the crows come into sight, their wings outstretched, trailing feathers ruffled black and shiny in the morning light. They wheeled over the distant trees and settled on the highest branches. She reached into her windbreaker and brought out the letter. She smiled at the words on the single sheet of paper. It was an actual letter, sent through the actual postal service. Jessie shook her head. Only Larry Boswell would answer an email with a mailed letter. She had been afraid that he wouldn't be able to make the trip—at nearly 85 years of age he wasn't as spry as he used to be, but as he wrote, *“all the hobgoblins in the Easterly Woods couldn't stop me!”*

It had been over 15 years since they had seen each other. Oh, they had kept in touch through the mail, social media and even through rare video conferencing, and they both promised to come out for a visit, but their lives had kept them busy and schedules kept on changing. It was what it was, but this time, finally, there

was time enough.

*Time running away. Still so much to accomplish . . .*

\* \* \*

Jessie heard the taxi scrunching up her long gravel driveway. She felt both nervous and excited. She checked her blouse and jeans, scooped her hair back behind her ears, and told herself to calm down. *You're acting like . . . a 13-year-old girl who's about to meet her most favorite author!*

She laughed as she opened the door and stepped out to greet her old friend. He stood leaning heavily on a cane, thin and graying, but his eyes, though, were very much the same. Full of kindness. *Smiling eyes*, she'd always called them.

"Looks like I'm in your neck of the woods, now," he said. "This is amazing! You have done an incredible job here. Pictures do not do it justice."

"Oh, you just wait, you ain't seen nothing yet!"

Jessie rushed over and gave him a big hug. She had a moment of concern as she felt how frail he'd become. He felt light as a bird. Kissing his cheek, she said, "We have to fatten you up, Mr. Boswell!"

“I could use one of your elderberry pies, or two,” he said laughing. He held out the crook of his arm and Jessie slid hers through, leading him up the short steps to the front door.

They sat at the kitchen table, all smooth and polished wood, set with hand crafted chairs. Joe’s work. The same with the hickory cabinets and marble inlaid counters. The man had been a born carpenter. Jessie brought over a steaming cup of coffee and sat next to Larry.

“It’s been a long time, Jessie.” Larry gazed about the room, his eyes stopping to rest on hers. “It all turned out well, for both of us.”

Jessie placed her hand over his. “We didn’t forget,” she said. “Not one thing.”

Larry nodded. “Have you ever . . . has she ever . . . .”

Jessie shrugged. “Dreams mostly. Sometimes though, out of the corner of my eye I think I see her. Sometimes I see a fox at the edge of the woods.”

“I wonder why, after all these years, we’ve never been able to go back?”

Jessie gazed out the window. A beautiful day, full of warming sun and a slow parade of fluffy white clouds. A day not unlike a special one so long ago. “I’ve often asked the full moon and the star-filled night that very question,” she said.

“Maybe we needed to prove to ourselves that we could go on, by ourselves. That we could do this with only our belief and memory to help us. But I do believe we will see all of them again. We’ve done well, Larry. We’ve created small miracles everywhere.”

Larry chuckled and it sounded like the Larry she’d first met. “Always said you were too smart for your age. You’re still too smart for your age.”

Jessie stood up. “I asked you here to show you something. Something I think you are going to love.”

“Oh? Another book? You sure out-paced me in that department. Who would have thought a little girl living in a Texas suburb would exceed both my talent and popularity!”

“I owe everything to you, my friend.” Jessie said. “Little Wonders, both book and sanctuary, would never have happened without you. Now hush! I want to show you my thanks, from the bottom of my heart.”

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They walked slowly, with Jessie at Larry’s side, among the early flowers, now beginning to bloom, and under the soft rustle of oaks and hemlocks. A deep silence embraced them, a silence that made them want to speak in whispers, as if passing through an ancient cathedral. The only sound came from their shoes and

Larry's cane, soft and light on the grassy path. Then far off, a series of echoing caws. The brief chirp of a songbird. The drone of a spring-warmed bee.

"This is so beautiful. All of it," Larry said, and then stopped. He took a sharp breath. On a wooden sign, with an arrow carved beneath it pointing further into the forest, were the words: *Boswell's Wood*. He reached out and touched it with a trembling hand. He struggled not to cry. "Oh, my," he said. "Oh, my."

Jessie hugged his side, smiling, tears in her own eyes. "It's the least I could do. But hold on, this isn't what I wanted to show you."

Larry gave her a quizzled look. "What, there's more?"

"Oh, yes."

As they came from under the dappled shadows of the forest, the space before them brightened and widened, spreading out in a sloping mist-covered pond. And crossing that pond, its stone arch rising through the mist like a dragon's back, stood a bridge.

Larry turned slowly, as uncertainty, hope, fear, and joy all flashed through his eyes. "How?"

Jessie raised her hands in a questioning gesture. "It's been here since I wrote to you. It's been here for you. Waiting. Come on! Don't be afraid!"

She led him to the edge of the pond and to the foot of the stone bridge. He hesitated, his body shaking. “What’s going to happen?” he whispered. “Will you come across with me?”

Jessie shook her head slowly. “Your adventure waits,” she said. “It’s not for me. Not yet. I still have so much left to do.”

“Jessie, I don’t—”

And then she appeared. Looking not a day older, though nearly 40 years had passed since Jessie last saw her. Tall, willowy, her dress the color of a twilight sky, her hair flowing gold to her waist, her face both regal and kind, and her eyes filled with all the warmth of a summer’s day. *Queen Caelia*. She approached them both and embraced them. She smelled of sweet wildflowers and dusty rain.

“It is so wonderful to see you both again,” she said. “What a special, perfect place this has become. The strength of your belief, as I knew it would be, has given all of us much joy. Jessie, my dear, you have my eternal thanks. And you, Larry Boswell, it makes my heart full to see you found and so very alive!”

Larry wept openly, great sobs racking his body. Queen Caelia held out her hand. “Do you choose to come with me?” she asked Larry.

Larry looked up sharply and then over to Jessie, his gaze a mixture of

excitement and question. “Jessie? Come with me, please. Come with me.”

Queen Caelia took his hand. “It is not her time,” she said softly. “But you will see her again. I promise.” Queen Caelia placed her palm over her heart. “Jessie, bright blessings.”

Jessie rushed to Larry and kissed him. She smiled through her tears. “Welcome home,” she said. “I’ll see you after a while. Say hello to Umbrielle and Kit—”

A fox came bounding across the bridge, her body churning through the mist. She yipped loudly and sprang up into Jessie’s arms. Her soft wet tongue licking at Jessie’s cheek. “How could I not come and say hello,” she heard Kit say. “I have missed you.”

“And I, you,” Jessie said. “You take care of Larry, okay? And say hello to Umbrielle and Devon!” Kit yipped and jumped down to snake her body around Larry’s legs.

As Queen Caelia led Larry Boswell away, the mist and bridge began to stretch out, growing thinner and thinner. For a second, her old friend turned and sought her out, as if peering through a thickening veil, and as he raised his hand, a 14-year-old-boy waved goodbye.

And then they were gone.

At the edge of the pond, Jessie lifted her head to the sky, her eyes filled by soft, shimmering light. She laughed and knew such sweetness as the world around her became lost in a fall of stardust.

THE END