



RIDLEY PEARSON

KINGDOM
KEEPERS

NOVELLA

UNFORESEEN



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Unforeseen, A Kingdom Keepers Novella

by

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Dedication

For Lisa, and the readers of the Kingdom Keepers who want to know more...

I COULDN'T SLEEP. More accurately, I *wouldn't*. Afraid that I'd have the same dream again, afraid I wouldn't remember it, I lay awake trying to clear my mind. It was important I remember my dreams: they meant something. I could see the future.

Staring at the underside of Amanda's gray-flecked mattress and the web of interwoven wires and springs supporting it, I listened to the purr of Jeannie Pucket's snoring, and felt the familiar longing to be somewhere else. What was supposed to pass for life was more a repetition of boring events, with me always the onlooker, never the participant. If I happened to be involved in something exciting, I ended up being the victim, the target, the tragic heroine. I wanted out.

But there was no "out." I'd bounced from one foster home to another; I'd been selected for and "enrolled" in a boarding school that was actually a secret government testing facility I'd escaped with Amanda, only for both of us to end up in Mrs. Nash's foster home in Orlando, Florida.

All of that running and fear, and for what? To get up, go to school, do chores. Lather, rinse, repeat. My life was a closed track, like the red one they'd built around the football field. There was no telling where it started and stopped.

I hid under the covers, my journal and a small booklight in hand, trying to sketch my dream. It was late, well past our 10:30 curfew, but as I said: I couldn't sleep.

Giving up on trying to draw, I flipped through my journal, looking for clues that might trigger some memory of the elusive dream. The journal's pages were filled with drawings and notes. My dream journal. My portal into the future. How any of this was possible, I had no idea, but I'd given up trying to figure it out. It was like the birthmark under my left arm—just there, like it or not.

A bunch of my recent drawings involved the Disney Hosts Interactive—the DHIs. Finn, Charlene, Maybeck, Philby, and Willa were five teenagers who'd ended up as the models for interactive hologram hosts that served as personal tour guides inside the Disney parks. The technology was wild—the holograms looked absolutely real. Touchable. Yet they were nothing but projected light.

I'd started dreaming about them and drawing them before I knew they existed. You want to talk about strange.

Skimming through my journal and reflecting on all the things we'd done together over the past few years made me nostalgic. The five DHIs had had a weirder few years than Amanda and me, and that was saying something. The fact that we'd all found each other—one massive group of weirdos if you believed the rumors flying around school hallways—made our collective mission more important to me. More important to all of us.

There was this fuzzy line between the five kids and their holograms that got crossed when they went to sleep. Unlike what I experienced when I nodded off—or what you experience, for that matter—the Keepers ended up not in a dream state but in a reality shift, one that left them inside the Magic Kingdom or Epcot late at night, after the parks had closed.

And they weren't alone. Or safe.

Some of my drawings made me happy. Others, not so much.

I woke with a start, my heart pounding. I'd fallen into the same nightmare yet again. Something to do with Mickey Mouse, smoke, a cracked surface like a mirror—maybe a window, wall, or floor. My journal was lying on my stomach under the covers, and I picked it up, but it was no use. I couldn't recall a visual image strong enough to inspire me to sketch.

Again.

Why couldn't I visualize it? Was it too frightening? Too insignificant? Too personal? Not personal enough? Was I losing my "gift"?

I squinted tightly, willing the dream to return. The resulting darkness mocked me; exasperation and anger shot through my veins. My so-called "power" was nothing but a curse. When I was able to visualize my dreams, I ended up afraid of the future; when I couldn't, I was afraid of the present.

I nudged Amanda's mattress, hoping to wake her. Maybe if I could talk this through it would help. Nothing. She slept soundly.

Feeling suddenly claustrophobic, I slid out of bed, trying to control my runaway breathing. I was too cooped up, too lorded over by Mrs. Nash and her endless rules. I loved Amanda like a sister, but even her company was wearing on me. I had to get out, and I had to get out alone.

I dressed quickly, glad my prodding hadn't awakened Mandy. She wouldn't know what any of

this meant; I'd only worry her with my lame explanation about a fleeting, terrifying dream. But there *was* someone who could help...if I could only figure out how to reach him.

OUTSIDE, WAITING FOR A BUS, I felt alive for the first time in a long while. Then I identified my feeling—fear, rather than a sense of vitality—and I wondered about my own impulses. Grabbing my cell, I called Wayne's daughter, Wanda. She was probably in her forties, which explained the groggy, dry voice that answered my middle-of-the-night call.

"Hello?"

"It's me, Jess." I paused. "Of Amanda and Jess?"

"Oh, hi, honey... Wow, it's late."

"Yeah. Sorry about that."

"Are you okay?" Her voice shed the fatigue quickly. "What's going on?"

I tried to explain myself, but hearing my own words, added, "That didn't come out so great."

"No, I think I get it. You need to talk to my dad."

"I don't know if I need to, but it feels like that, yeah."

"I'll come get you."

"No, seriously, the next bus takes me practically to the Magic Kingdom. I just don't know what to do once I get there."

I'd made the right choice. Wanda had a plan.

LESS THAN A MILE FROM THE MAGIC KINGDOM, I walked in the shadows along the dark, empty roads, passing beneath towering trees and the occasional billboard rising like a skyscraper out of the blackish-green murk of my surroundings. I traversed vast, empty parking lots, continuing on toward the entrance to the Magic Kingdom. According to plan, I stopped and waited in the shadows just shy of the turnstiles. The air was still and silent; I felt cold despite the warm Florida night.

Time seemed to hang still and tense around me—and then something shifted. I sensed I was being watched. Was it all my imagination? Or maybe Wayne himself? I whispered his name.

No reply.

One more time.

Nothing. I edged into the bushes, crouched and waited, my ears aching from the silence.

When a wave of warm breath flooded the back of my neck, I let out a silent scream, and spun around to face a pair of animal eyes. I wanted to run, but my legs wouldn't move. Wanted to cry out, but my voice was gone.

Then I laughed a nervous, relieved laugh. It was Pluto. Tail wagging, tongue lolling out of his mouth. Not the plush Pluto with the rubber nose standing on two feet, but the *dog*. Wet nose. Four paws. Warm—disgusting!—breath. That Pluto. A few years ago, the sight would have shocked me, but after my experiences with the DHIs, not much surprised me anymore.

Pluto bit down on my sleeve and pulled, dragging me toward the bushes and the woods beyond. At first I resisted, but his determination convinced me that I had no choice.

As we moved deeper into the greenery, the bushes turned to dense forest. Then that forest changed quickly from Florida foliage to...What?

With Pluto leading the way, the branches intertwined more thickly overhead, diffusing and blocking the pale moonlight until I could barely see Pluto. Holding on tightly to the scruff of his neck, I stayed at his side. He was my service dog. I was now in his care.

A dog. On one level, it made me want to laugh.

The landscaping should have been only yards deep. Three minutes in, we were still going. I tripped over a root, fell and scratched my arm. Pluto licked me. The trees rustled and creaked. How was that possible given there was no breeze?

Pluto whimpered, huddling closer to my legs. It felt like the trees were closing in on us. Suddenly, something gripped my shoulder. A bony hand? No, a knotted branch! Trunks morphed into terrifying faces. Sharp pieces of bark protruded from dark crevices, forming mouths that could swallow me whole. Twisted branches reached out for me like arms and hands. As I fought off one, another took hold. It curled and snapped and splintered as it dragged me toward its trunk.

Growling, Pluto leapt at the tree that held me, scratching at the bark, nipping at the branches. The limbs overhead moaned. As the tree turned on him, it released me, and I ran.

“Come on, boy!”

Pluto sunk his teeth into the extended branch and snapped it in half. He bolted past me, barking for me to follow as he dodged through the trees. I slid, skidded, and dove to avoid the branches stretching for me. They were slow, a beat late. Finally we crashed through to an empty parking lot and a Cast Member backstage entrance.

Together, we made a mad dash for Main Street.

PLUTO RAN AHEAD AND SAT DOWN in front of the firehouse’s side staircase. A door opened at the top of the stairs, and a head of familiar white hair emerged, glowing in the moonlight.

Wayne Kresky, a Disney Legend and one of the original Imagineers, broke into a wide smile. “You found her, did you?” he called down to Pluto. “Good boy! Jessica, please, come up.”

I climbed the stairs, pausing for just a moment before entering. I had never been inside it before. I felt so honored I was flush with excitement.

Wayne disappeared into the apartment’s galley kitchen and returned with a plate of cookies and two cups of tea, which he placed before us.

“Sorry I couldn’t let you in myself. I’m on a bit of a tight leash lately. Ever since...Dillard.”

Finn’s best friend Dillard had died trying to help the DHIs during a battle at a Mexican temple. The Imagineers, Wayne, and the DHIs—now referred to as the Kingdom Keepers because, at least temporarily, they’d saved the kingdom from destruction—had all suffered mightily from his loss of life.

I heard bitterness as Wayne spoke. “The Imagineers no longer consider the Overtakers to be a significant danger. For what that’s worth. I don’t happen to agree, which is why I was extremely interested in what Wanda said about your stubborn dream.”

I explained the past two weeks of my vague, intangible dreams. It was such a relief to share it with someone, that the story poured out of me.

Wayne listened, a troubled look on his face. “Smoke. Mickey. Cracks.”

“I think so. I can’t be sure. It wasn’t clear like the others.”

“Please, my dear girl, do not trouble yourself. A gift is to be shared, not a burden. I might know a way to invoke the visions, a way to make them longer lasting. Perhaps if we put you in the right situation...” A glimmer of hope flared in my chest.

“What is it?” I whispered.

Wayne paced the small room. “The things you’ve described...I recognize the signs.” More pacing and contemplation. “My dear, every story has a beginning, middle, and end. I had hoped that the events in Mexico represented the end of this story. The end of our troubles with the Overtakers. But now, I fear that may not be the case. Perhaps the worst is yet to come.”

Worse than Dillard’s death? Tempted to interrupt, the distant look in Wayne’s eyes kept me silent.

“Things may happen now, Jessica. Unbelievable, horrible things. They are not your fault, nor mine. Remember we’re in a place powered by the belief of countless millions; anything can happen here. These parks make the impossible possible. While that may strengthen our heroes, it unfortunately does the same for our foes. The voodoo priestess, the one you call Tia Dalma, escaped from custody. We don’t know how long ago. A transformation spell was involved.”

“Wait! What? I thought the Overtakers are *done*. That’s what everyone’s been saying, right? Maleficent is *dead*. Chernabog and the Evil Queen were *buried alive*. Tia Dalma is locked up!”

“Was.”

“No way!”

“This is confidential, my dear. Not even the Keepers must know for now. The forces that oppose us are not insignificant. The unfortunate events in Mexico may have only fueled their fury, as they have ours. This fleeting dream of yours may be important. We must find a way to loosen it, to look at it. Agreed?”

“Yes! That’s why I’m here!”

Wayne resumed his pacing, muttering to himself. “Is there anything else—anything at all?”

I told him I had tried—and failed.

“Your insight may be stronger here in the park...surrounded by the magic. Perhaps all that’s needed is a spark, something to trigger your visions. If we put you in the right place...” Wayne’s eyes filled with excitement and possibility as he looked me in the eyes. “You mentioned cracks. What kind of cracks?”

I trembled under his gaze, not wanting to disappoint. “I don’t know.”

“Rocks? Bricks? Glass?” Wayne asked. He walked to his apartment window and looked outside.

“I can’t be sure. Rocks, maybe?”

He turned to me with a smile. “Cinderella Castle. We’ll start there!”

I followed Wayne out the door and onto the landing outside. He stopped abruptly, turned and held a finger to his lips, signaling for quiet. There was a rustling noise, the sound of footsteps. Someone was down there.

“Pluto?” I mouthed to Wayne.

He shook his head.

Two shadowy figures appeared on Main Street. I took a step back, hoping to return to the safety of Wayne’s apartment, but he stopped me. My movement had caused the figures to pause and look in our direction. Overtakers? I wondered.

After a moment the two continued down Main Street, away from the firehouse.

“Who was that?” I asked.

“If I had to guess: Horace and Jasper.”

“Cruella’s goons?”

“The same. When the Imagineers were planning the Sorcerers of the Magic Kingdom game, I warned them not to do it. They seldom listen to me anymore. When the game was finally installed, it accidentally allowed an influx of unsavory characters to the park, Horace and Jasper among them.

“We need to get to the castle quickly,” he continued. “Horace and Jasper aren’t so bright. We should be able to avoid them if we stay off the street. We’ll use the Emporium to keep us off Main Street and take it from there.”

Wayne opened a door into the Emporium, admitting us to the expansive merchandise shop that stretched far down the left side of Main Street. Built as a string of connecting rooms, each had its own themed merchandise: pins, toys, hats, clothing. Even cookware.

We passed a display of books, where the Kingdom Keepers series was featured prominently. “That never stops feeling weird,” I murmured.

The sound of a door closing quietly made me jump. We weren’t alone.

He leaned in. “You are the prize, dear girl. They mustn’t capture you. I’ll create a distraction. Once you climb Escher’s Keep, you’ll be safe.” He spoke so confidently, as if it was a given I would make it. Before I could protest, Wayne hurried off.

Alone in the darkness, the Emporium became a frightening place. The displays cast strange shadows; every corner could’ve hidden an Overtaker. Hearing footsteps, I ducked behind a carousel of pins, my heart pounding. When the sound faded, I dashed to a long, low shelf. I dropped to hands and knees and crawled, listening intently.

Behind me, I heard someone moving slowly and carefully, as if in a game of hide-and-seek. If I’d known the rooms better, I might have made a run for it. Crashing into a T-shirt display would only get me caught. I scampered away from the sound of shoes. The aisle looked more like a canyon to cross. I’d be exposed.

With little choice, I scurried forward on all fours, crossed the aisle, came to my feet and, crouching, weaved my way through displays. Arriving to a Pirates display, I grabbed a toy sword and took it in hand.

The beating of my heart in my chest obscured my hearing, but I could feel the person nearing. I turned one way, then the other, fearing being caught from behind. I raised the sword, backed up slowly, turned, and...

Crashed into my pursuer. I screamed.

A warm, moist palm clamped over my mouth and I bit down.

Not a man, but a female’s cry rang through the shelves.

I knew that voice!

The hand released.

“Mandy?” I gasped. I stared at her in disbelief. Swept my plastic sword into her side, testing if she was a hologram; the sword connected. “Amanda?”

We hugged. She squeezed more tightly than I did. Though I was afraid to admit it, I found myself vaguely disappointed by her presence being here. My initial fears in the woods had given way to the excitement of teaming up with Wayne. I wanted—*needed*—a chance to be me, separate and away from Jess-and-Amanda, from our old dynamic in which she possessed the physical “gift” and I was seen as the dreamer.

“You didn’t think I’d let you sneak out without me, did you?” she whispered.

I felt a second wave of disappointment. “I didn’t want to worry you.”

“You thought that disappearing in the middle of the night wouldn’t worry me? I heard you climbing out the window.” She paused, held me at arms’ length. “What’s going on? What’s with you?”

We were far too close. She could read me so easily.

“I... We need to get to the castle,” I said.

Amanda remained uncharacteristically silent as we continued through the Emporium together. When we reached the area filled with toys and dolls, I pointed at the new Small World singing dolls. “Creepy, huh? We should probably smile at them,” I joked. But Amanda didn’t laugh.

“Don’t be mad.” I told her about the dream and my frustration over its refusal to reveal itself. “I needed Wayne’s help.”

“But not mine? You should have told me!” snapped Amanda. “You should have told Finn! What if he’s in danger?”

I wanted more than ever to be alone with just Wayne.

“That’s exactly why I couldn’t tell you!”

“It must be hard not being able to see it,” she said quietly. “I’m sorry.”

I hated myself for feeling like I didn’t want her there with me.

“I’m fine,” I muttered.

Amanda knew I was lying.

WAYNE WAS SOMEWHERE ahead of us. Amanda and I walked quietly.

“Are you sure we can trust him?” Amanda broke the silence.

“Who? Wayne? Of course we can,” I replied, surprised at the suggestion.

“Don’t forget, he was the one who got Dillard involved, and...” Amanda stopped, choked up.

“He couldn’t have known that would happen,” I said defensively.

“How do we know that? He’s getting old. What if he’s...you know.” Amanda circled her finger next to her ear.

“Amanda! How can you say that? He’s *Wayne!* Look, no one asked you to—” I managed to stop talking, which was not the easiest thing.

Clomp...clomp...clomp... Footsteps. This time, heavier, almost wooden. Amanda and I looked around nervously.

We walked faster, hoping to catch up with Wayne. The clomping sound grew louder and closer. We took off running. Risking a glance over my shoulder, I spotted our pursuers. Mannequins! Freakish, headless things, dressed in little girls’ princess costumes. Horace and Jasper had called in reinforcements. The Overtakers had enlisted crash-test dummies and CPR rescue dummies before, but these were the strangest of all. Some stumbled forward on stiff legs; others hopped on single poles. All moved at an alarming rate. “Amanda...” I gulped. She looked behind us and shrieked.

“We can’t outrun them,” I said.

“We won’t have to,” Amanda replied. I nodded, understanding. She stopped in her tracks, allowing the unsuspecting mannequins to get closer. They didn’t know what we knew: Amanda had the power to telekinetically *push*. With the mannequins only a yard away, Amanda took a deep breath, put up her arms, and *pushed*. The mannequins flew backwards, landing in a jumbled pile on the ground.

“Come on,” I urged Amanda. We had to get away before the mannequins untangled themselves.

We ran toward Wayne, who had appeared at the other side of the room. “Hurry!” he called. Amanda stumbled—*pushing* drained her energy—and I stepped closer to her, letting her lean against me. Wayne joined us, pulling Amanda along. We rushed through the Emporium, finally emerging into the open air.

Outside of the Emporium, Amanda and I waited for Wayne’s command to move forward. He looked conflicted. What if Horace and Jasper were waiting for us? The clomping of mannequins advancing from behind made the decision for us. “Come on!” I exclaimed, grabbing Wayne and Amanda’s hands and pulling them forward with me. We ran to the hub of Main Street, the mannequins not far behind us.

“I could *push* them again,” Amanda offered.

“No, save your strength,” Wayne replied. “The mannequins are little more than robots. They can’t think for themselves. We can’t outrun them, but we *can* outwit them.”

“They’ll never figure out the way into Escher’s Keep!” I exclaimed.

“Exactly.” Reaching the hub, we passed the Partners statue and ran toward the entrance tunnel in Cinderella Castle. We could get to Escher’s Keep via the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique. Wayne had used that entrance the first time he led the Keepers into Escher’s Keep, back when the Boutique space had been occupied by a gift shop. As I saw the castle up close, my vision of cracks flickered in front of my eyes.

“They’re the same cracks...” I murmured.

Seeing the dazed expression on my face, Amanda recognized the look that accompanied my visions. But we couldn’t stop now—the mannequins were gaining on us. “Not now, Jess,” Amanda said as she yanked me forward. Blinking my eyes, I shook off the haze and followed her.

As we entered the tunnel, Horace and Jasper appeared at the other end, blocking our route to the Boutique. They’d been waiting for us. Behind us, the mannequins had already reached the Partners statue in the middle of the Hub.

“Hurry, girls. There’s another way in.” Wayne led us down the ramp and around the castle with the Overtakers in hot pursuit. Wayne stared at the castle’s wall, mumbling to himself as he tried to remember. He jabbed one stone, then another. Suddenly, a door—invisible only moments before—opened in the wall. Wayne ushered us into the dark hallway. With the Overtakers so close behind us, there was no time to close the heavy, stone door. We ran ahead, the sounds of our pursuers ever nearer.

It took all three of us to open the next door at the end of the passage. The effort cost us precious time—the mannequins, Horace, and Jasper were only steps behind us. With no time to spare, we dashed through the door into the throne room of Cinderella’s Royal Table and toward the entrance to Escher’s Keep.

A cavernous room opened up in front of me—Escher’s Keep. It looked like an optical illusion, something you’d see in a book of mind games. Staircases led up, down, even sideways. A variety of doors, pathways, and platforms were scattered throughout at seemingly impossible locations, all crisscrossed and interconnected in a headache-inducing puzzle. But this was no illusion: it was real, and we had to navigate our way through it. There was only one safe path; a single wrong move would send us down a slide into the castle moat or dropping to floor level to start over. It led the castle’s secret apartment, originally built for Walt Disney but never occupied by him. It was one of the few places where we might escape the reach of the Overtakers.

Wayne scanned the first tier of staircases. Only one would lead us onto the next platform. All others were red herrings: decoys that ended at dead ends, disappearing stairs, and quick descents to the moat. Picking the correct one, he quickly ushered us up one staircase, then another, and then another. The stairs were steep, and Wayne was out of breath. Reaching a platform that led to a long, dark hall, we paused to rest for a moment. While Wayne caught his breath, I peeked down at the entrance below. The Overtakers were still at the entrance to Escher’s Keep, clearly uncertain of what to do next. Horace—the shorter and squatter of the two goons—stared, slack-jawed, at his surroundings. The mannequins stood still, waiting for orders, but Horace and Jasper were too flummoxed by the puzzle...until they spotted us on the platform. “There!” I heard Jasper announce.

The mannequins charged forward, climbing every staircase in sight. Most chose poorly and fell down the chutes one after the other, like lemmings following one another off a cliff. But a lucky few

picked the right staircase and made it to the first platform. Those that made it attacked the second set of staircases. This time, only two made it to the next platform. Splashes sounded out below us as the others landed roughly in the moat.

Horace and Jasper climbed up after the successful mannequins, carefully following the correct path. Only one staircase separated us from them. The last two mannequins charged up the stairs...and abruptly disappeared. They had chosen the wrong one.

Horace and Jasper wouldn't make that same mistake.

WAYNE STARED AT THE COLORED TILES at our feet. Escher's Keep presented obstacles and puzzles impossible to solve without trial and error, or knowing the clues.

"Right is right...no, that wasn't it," Wayne said. "Right is wrong, so left is right. Yes, that's it."

Amanda and I exchanged a worried look.

"We must stay on the left side of the path," he said. "Was it red for Sorcerer Mickey's cloak, or blue for his hat?"

I could hear the men drawing closer, huffing as they climbed. "They're coming," I said.

Wayne carefully tested a red tile. The floor opened up beneath him. Amanda shoved her arms forward, exerting her paranormal ability. She slammed Wayne into a pillar as the floor dropped out from beneath where he'd been standing.

"Blue!" Amanda said, still invisibly holding him to the pillar. Wayne stretched his foot to the blue tile. Amanda relaxed and Wayne's full weight came down to the floor. The red tile's trapdoor returned into place.

"Interesting," Wayne said, smoothing his clothes. He looked at Amanda admiringly. "Thank you, my dear."

"No problem."

"Blue," he said, with a chuckle.

"Yes."

The three of us crossed the tiled pathway quickly. We reached the other side as Jasper appeared—upside down!—behind us across the expanse of tiles. Horace was nowhere to be seen, likely already a victim to one of the Keep's traps.

The mirrors created an astonishing illusion. Jasper tried to invert himself to get a better look at us.

"Eenie, meenie, miny..." He tried to outrace the trickery, jumping forward, a foot on either color tile. But as the red gave way, he lost his balance, teetered toward the open hole and fell.

"This is our chance," Wayne announced. "Hurry, ladies."

We successfully crossed and avoided several more obstacles, finally reaching the Black Hole—an elevator car illuminated only by stars painted on its ceiling far above us.

As the elevator platform rose, Amanda, weakened by supporting Wayne earlier, swayed, barely able to stand.

When we arrived to the apartment, Wayne opened the door and I helped Amanda to the couch.

"Excellent!" Wayne declared. "You did very well, young lady."

Amanda nodded, exhausted.

Wayne motioned for me to join him at the apartment's only window, little more than a glassed-in slit through which an archer might fire an arrow.

I peered out at the Magic Kingdom in its spectacular glory. What a place! What a view! For a moment I saw only the magic and joy, the vibrancy of the Kingdom. How could anyone—even a villain—want to destroy all this?

"Jessica? What do you see?"

"Magic! How wonderful a place this is!"

"Yes."

We ruminated for a moment. I could *feel* Wayne's memories flooding him. I treasured this chance to see the park alongside him, a Disney legend.

"As hard as it is, we must look beyond the good. Past the good."

"I don't know if that's possible."

"That's what they are counting on."

I looked into his eyes. I nodded. "I can try."

"All anyone can ask."

I closed my eyes instead of looking out. Wayne made no effort to correct me, and I appreciated him all the more.

"It's so hard," I said, "when there's so much beauty. How am I supposed to see the bad?"

He didn't answer.

I waited for some image to fill the void created by my closed eyes.

"Nothing," I said.

"Give it time..."

"I love this place," I said, still squinting. "How am I supposed to see something bad in something I love so much?"

"That's a lovely thing to say. Maybe...and I'm not claiming to know anything about it, dear girl...but maybe you don't need to see it. Maybe you can feel it?"

I don't know if he meant for it or not, but his words relieved me of the responsibility I'd been feeling to *see* something. It was as frustrating as trying to will oneself to sleep. With the burden lifted, I did in fact feel something.

"Ruin," I whispered. "Terror." I could barely utter the final word. "Destruction."

After a moment I opened my eyes.

Wayne's were filled with tears.

"I'M SORRY. NO VISIONS."

"We should only be sorry for those things we could have done differently, my dear. It is a word rarely offered, but always accepted."

Wayne seemed to measure me. "What say we embark on an adventure, the three of us?"

Amanda came off the couch, curious.

"I think we already have," I said, winning a smile from him.

"I'm not saying it would work." He looked at us mischievously, his mirth and playfulness, infectious.

Mandy and I knew better than to speak.

"You've heard of...certain shapes discovered in the parks?"

We both nodded. Every Disney fan knew about the small silhouettes of the mouse placed throughout the parks. "Hidden Mickeys," I said.

He grinned and in spite of vowing never to discuss them he said, "There's more to these shapes than meets the eye. True, some are merely ornamental. These came later. There's a deeper purpose to the early ones—a secret we, the Imagineers, have guarded closely for decades.

"Cast Members," he continued, "have long reported having visions of one of our central characters. I suppose they are not unlike the dreams that you've experienced."

My heart raced. Other people with visions like mine?

"They didn't have your gift, of course." Wayne quickly clarified. "They weren't visions, per se. More like snapshots. Always of this same character."

"Mickey," Amanda said.

"Always when standing in a particular spot. Imagineers marked any such spots. They were to serve as landmarks for future Cast Members and Imagineers." Wayne's eyes lit up with excitement as he spoke. "For moments like this. Imagine what might happen if you, Jessica, were to stand in one of those places! With your abilities, the strength of your visions?"

For a moment, I was silent. "So you want me to visit all the Hidden Mickeys?"

"Not just visit. You'll likely have to make contact," Wayne added.

"And they're going to unlock my dream?" I asked.

"That's what you want, isn't it?"

When I heard it put to me like that, I wasn't so sure.

The apartment suddenly felt exceedingly claustrophobic.

"Can we go now? I'm not feeling real safe all of a sudden."

They both showed concern. Wayne, who'd returned to the slit window, grumbled while pointing down. "We appear to have attracted a crowd."

I took a look. There, on stage terrace facing Main Street stood a dozen figures.

Overtakers.

There was no way for us to leave.

Suddenly, I heard scratching. Moving toward the apartment door, Amanda extended her arms ready to hold the door closed if necessary.

But it wasn't coming from the front. It was behind us.

"The closet," Amanda said.

Sure enough, opening the closet door caused the sound to grow louder.

"Ah ha!" Wayne said. "I'm getting old and feeble-minded. Stand back, my dears." He stepped into the closet. "It's a false back," he said.

"I don't mean to be rude," I said, making sure I interrupted him, "but how do we know it's safe to open it?"

"Why, the scratching, of course," Wayne said, not allowing me to delay him.

"It could be the hyenas!" I said.

"The Small World dolls," Amanda added.

"Look more closely." He pointed down to a tuft of blue fur coming and going in the gap at the bottom.

Wayne giggled childishly as he spun around inside the closet, then took on a look of frustration. "Ah, yes!" he said, finding two coat hooks less than an arm's length apart. He hung his weight from both and the back wall popped open.

Wayne said, "It's only Stitch!"

The alien stepped into the light, his pointy, yellowed teeth and a round nose leading the way. This was followed by an oversized eye, too big for the fuzzy blue head it occupied.

I knew Stitch as a turncoat. He had once pursued Finn across Tom Sawyer Island, clearly serving the Overtakers. Later, he'd helped the Keeper team. Some of us believed he'd been under an Overtaker spell when he'd been against us. How were we supposed to trust him now? I recalled my own service to Maleficent and felt awful for judging Stitch so quickly.

Amanda must have caught my look of distrust. "He helped me and Finn at Typhoon Lagoon."

This wasn't a character suit worn by a Cast Member.

"Can we get down the stairs?" Wayne asked him, pointing down the emergency stairs.

Stitch shook his head vehemently. He then pointed *up* the stairs.

Wayne said, "I should have thought of that."

"How did you know we were here?" Amanda asked.

Stitch patted his chest and blinked at Amanda like a week old puppy.

I felt a lump in my throat. That one gesture of his summed up what I loved about all things Disney.

"Yeah," I said, "I know exactly what you mean."

Wayne smiled, and patted the blue head.

"Lead on," he said.

STITCH LED US UP A STONE SPIRAL STAIRCASE that terminated in a short tunnel. It ended ten feet later in open air. It felt like we were a hundred feet high. Climbing harnesses and other pieces of gear, like straps and carabiners, hung from wall hooks. I looked out across the expanse of the park down the zip line that ran so far it disappeared. I wasn't sure I could do what I knew came next.

"Ahhh..."

"I'm over four times your age, young lady, and I'm going," Wayne declared, "so I don't want to hear it."

I didn't know Wayne well. Most of what I knew I'd heard from others. But this sudden take charge attitude surprised me. I'd pictured him much more chill. Yet I found myself admiring it. The banging behind us reminded me we weren't here for a tour.

"Did you shut both doors?" Wayne asked me.

Had I been the last one through? I was about to blame Amanda when I reconsidered.

"You and Stitch go first!" I said, my voice betraying my intended outward sense of calm.

“Amanda and I will—”

But Amanda was already off.

I followed, not waiting for Wayne’s response.

WE FLEW DOWN THE STAIRS, racing against the Overtakers to be the first ones to the door. Our footfalls echoed through the stone stairwell, barely audible over the rush of blood in my ears.

Reaching the apartment, already out of breath, I darted forward to close the door. I paused, hearing voices.

“They ain’t here.” A voice coming from *inside* the apartment.

Beside me, Amanda gasped. “They made it through Escher’s Keep.” No one made it through the maze without being shown the way. At least, until now.

“But we heard them,” A second voice complained. “They have to be here somewhere.” Our footsteps, I realized. We had been so concerned with getting to the door that we hadn’t stopped to consider the noise we’d made in the process. Now Horace and Jasper, judging by the gruffness of their voice, had heard us. We only had seconds left before they would head in this direction.

Slowly, but quietly, I worked the door shut, keeping the hinges from shrieking loudly in protest to the movement they were so unaccustomed to, judging by the rust building up. Once in place, we lifted a board Amanda found nearby into the holders on either side of the door, a lock left over from the apartment’s time as Maleficent’s prison. This way the Overtakers would have to break down the door at least, though as I heard them make their way into the room on the other side of the door, I doubted it would hold them back for long.

Finger to her lips, Amanda signaled to me it was time for us to go. We backed away and turned, running back up the stairs, this time on tiptoe.

It was strange finding the stone launching area empty and two of the harnesses missing. I wanted to believe Wayne and Stitch had made it out safely, but the temptation was to lean my head out and look down for the two bodies I feared would be flat out on the pavement.

“Don’t!” Amanda said. “We have to trust!”

I’d heard people talk about older married couples who could finish each others’ sentences, family members or lovers who knew how to connect with someone unconscious or lost in the wilderness. As a Fairlie, I couldn’t discount any supernatural experience. For several years my closest friends were kids who were capable of unbelievable acts. Feeling heat through walls. Translating over twenty languages while having studied none. Animal whispering. Amanda and I had something different, something closer to the old married couple syndrome. We knew what the other person was thinking practically before she thought it. Her calling me out like this startled me.

“They’re at the other end of that zip line,” she said, more softly.

Both of us heard the voices from below. They were louder now, suggesting they might be coming from *inside* the closet.

“We have to do this,” I said.

“That’s the other reason we can’t look down,” Amanda said. She fished the two remaining harnesses off the wall and we stepped into them. It took a moment to understand how to reconnect them, and it was only then we realized there was but one set of pulleys attached to the zip line.

Our pursuers banged on the closet wall, a sound that grew more violent with each passing second.

“Well…” Amanda said, hooking into the one pulley set, “at least we know there’s no way for them to follow us.”

I envied her ability to see the bright side. My two bad experiences with the Overtakers had turned me inward, made me fearful and cautious. In the past few years the Keepers had gone in and out of romances. I had friends, but nothing serious. I wasn’t sure I would trust enough for that. Amanda was different; I trusted her like a twin sister. Looking out a hole in a castle wall at nothing but painful darkness a hundred feet over asphalt, strapping into a few lengths of nylon webbing and some carabiners did not make me feel terribly optimistic.

Amanda helped me clip into her hardware, and she double-checked that we were both connected metal to metal, not straps, with the pulley device.

A loud *thunk* from down the spiral stairs. The scrape of rapid footsteps.

“Here goes,” she said. “Remember, I’ve done this before.”

I had my left arm holding Amanda; she had her right wrapped around me. It was like we were standing at the starting line of a three-legged race. Rather clumsily, we made our way to the edge of the open hole in the wall. There we perched, neither of us willing to take the last step.

“Flags,” I whispered. Something about flags flying on Main Street pulled at me. Sight of them rekindled my dream, but I wasn’t sure why. Like a memory of a memory, it was foggy and indistinct. I knew one thing: I had to go there, and I said so. “We have to get to those flags.”

“First things first,” Amanda said.

She pushed me out.

I DON’T REMEMBER MUCH beyond my screaming. If we were trying to keep a low profile, I had just done away with that. Mandy and I moved incredibly fast—*twice as fast* as the system was designed for, putting the zip in zip line. The pulley shrieked; my voice rose like a siren; the wind whipped my face to where my lips pulled back exposing my teeth and I imagined I looked something like a small, frightened horse or pony. We clung to each other so tightly my ribs felt bruised, my breath short.

And here’s the thing: it went on forever. I was no longer going to believe anyone describing a car accident as happening in slo-mo. There was nothing slow about this ride, except that it was slow to end. My eyes were watering to where I was blind. When I thought the zip line should be ending, we were in fact still gaining speed. If the pulley cried any louder I’d be deaf. It sounded like it was about to melt under our combined weight and send us to our deaths like being pushed out of an airplane. That was the problem: the sensation wasn’t one of zipping so much as falling. Only after what felt like five minutes did the pulley announce resistance as the pitch it sang began to lower down the musical scale. A slight sensation of slowing was followed by my eyes clearing.

Wayne, and a big blue alien, were positioned to brake us on arrival. I squinted and screamed once more.

The zip line’s landing zone was cushioned with blue gymnastic pads. Wayne and Stitch attempted to tackle us in flight. Wayne was knocked off his feet. Stitch ended up hanging onto me and crashing with us into the final stack of pads. No one was hurt. Amanda and I were caught up in nervous laughter. We’d taken the last of the harnesses, so there was no way to follow us down the line, even if the Overtakers had had the nerve.

WE SETTLED INTO THE ICE CREAM PARLOR, and Wayne told us to choose anything we’d like. Amanda and I pigged out on cookie dough scoops and cups of hot chocolate. For a few precious minutes, things seemed ordinary again. I’d just caught my breath and calmed my nerves when a light knock sounded, and Wayne opened the door to admit a shockingly good-looking boy, who looked a few years older than Amanda and me. He had coppery brown hair, alluring gray eyes, and a bright smile. He wore Cast Member khakis and a black windbreaker emblazoned with the Imagineers logo.

“Amanda, Jess, meet Jason,” Wayne said. “He’s one of our up-and-coming young Imagineers, on loan to us from...”

“UCLA.” Jason’s voice was as rich as a cello.

“I’m afraid I’m just too...seasoned,” Wayne said apologetically, “to continue these shenanigans. Jason will provide me with a much needed respite. Perhaps I can join you all later.”

“Hey,” Jason said, greeting us. There was a permanent flash of blushing red in his cheeks, as if he’d just run inside from the bitter cold.

Amanda and I nodded. I would have said something, but I was afraid my voice would crack.

Wayne filled him in about my attraction to the flags on the roof almost directly above us. Jason nodded thoughtfully, repeatedly making eye contact with me, which I found distracting. He’d clearly been briefed on our Fairlie powers as he seemed to be taking Wayne quite seriously.

Amanda caught the way I was looking at Jason, and she pursed her lips to contain a smile.

“Stop!” I whispered.

“No comment,” she said.

But we both knew this was the land of magic.

JASON, WHO HAD TO BE AT LEAST SIX-FEET-TWO, led us backstage of Main Street USA and up a series of staircases, inside and out. To my surprise, the buildings on each side of Main Street are contained beneath a single gigantic roof. Stitch, who'd been waiting for us outside, held the stairway door open so it wouldn't lock behind us as Jason, Amanda, and I crossed to the corner nearest Cinderella's Castle.

"Look carefully," Jason said. "They're not always easy to see."

Amanda and I needed no more instruction. As we closed in on the short flagpole, we began our search for a Hidden Mickey. Jason searched the short wall that rose from the flat roof while Mandy and I studied the flagpole itself. I expected to find a slight change in paint color, or maybe how the rope that hoisted the flag was coiled. Amanda stood away a few feet taking in the area. Between the three of us we had to find something.

"Maybe I'm wrong. I'm not always right, you know?" I said loudly enough for both to hear.

"From what I hear, you're right more often than wrong," Jason said. "I'll take those odds."

I wasn't sure I wanted his support. It made me feel...vulnerable. Amanda and I went back to our search, but Jason turned and, as I followed his sight to Stitch, and Stitch's pointed paw up into the sky, I spun a full pirouette.

Flying low over the Plaza, headed for Main Street, two buzzards flapped wing to wing.

"Hang on!" Jason whispered.

The warning caused Amanda to lift her head.

I stood still as ordered. The buzzards drew closer. Bigger and uglier now. I thought I recognized them from one of the attractions, which meant they weren't Florida buzzards but Disney buzzards. Overtaker buzzards.

The three of us were frozen in place as the two birds suddenly veered and dove for us, talons outstretched. Jason ducked. Amanda put the flagpole between her and the closest bird, but took a scratch to the head. I squatted, my attacker's ugly black nails missing by mere inches.

"I'll handle them," Amanda shouted. "Stay down!" Even small head wounds bleed badly.

Amanda's was no exception. She finally noticed the warm sensation above her ear, put her hand there and let out a shriek. She dabbed it again. "I'm good!" She had a Starbucks napkin on it.

"You can't *push* a bird!" I cried. "They'll only be shoved higher in the sky."

"You have a better suggestion?" she called back.

"Stitch!" Jason hollered, summoning the alien. "Attack!"

The blue creature streaked across the roof and sprang into the air as one of the buzzards dove for me.

I collapsed to the roof and tucked into a ball, expecting to be raked by talons.

From somewhere overhead came a spray of feathers. I hid from them, but as I dared to look out, I saw Stitch licking his feather-encrusted lips.

The second buzzard was in dive-bomber mode when he saw his comrade consumed. He fixed his wings, throwing his talons forward to brake himself, but Stitch raked his chest with a paw. It was like peeling bark off a tree. The bird was bare chested and missing most of its feathers there, doing a decent imitation of a Thanksgiving turkey. It tumbled across the roof, ran on its feet awkwardly and, with Stitch pursuing, leapt off the edge, found flight and took off in the direction of Space Mountain.

As I uncoiled, I realized I'd run away from the flagpole when under attack. I was now fifteen feet from it, my eyes facing a black wire stapled to the roof. While Amanda celebrated Stitch's accomplishments by hugging him and the two of them jumping in unison, I came to my knees and then stood. The black wire was a part of a coil—a perfect circle of what looked like television cable. A single strand connected this to another circle carefully stapled to keep it away from a small drain. I was just about to step away when my head snapped back to study the pattern of the wire. It was *too carefully stapled* into two congruent circles six inches apart. I took another few seconds before I could see the rusting drain as Mickey's head and the wires as his ears, but once I did it was unmistakable.

"Got it!" I announced, winning Jason's attention. I wasn't going to wait for instructions and I wasn't going to give any more Overtakers the chance to prevent us from our mission. Jason nodded

at me as if he understood my thinking. I didn't have to say a word; I just stepped onto the drain and closed my eyes.

The dark of my eyelids filled with a jagged shape, like the end of a broken stick, that grew in size as it moved toward me. To the right danced a pair of figures while two more to the left fell through space, tumbling in uncontrolled cartwheels. A ladder, or a track, or boxcars—maybe a section of a spreadsheet, or frames of a film—superimposed itself and then snapped in two. There was smoke or steam in a well-formed cloud now covering the two who had fallen. A sudden explosion. Lightning? I blinked involuntarily and with it, lost the image.

So different than any of my dreams, I'd experienced these waking visions only a handful of times. Where the dreams would be scenes with characters and actions, what I'd just seen was nothing of the sort. It had been more like an animation of a photograph, a hallucination. As I blinked once more, I saw again the uneven shape at the end of the broken stick.

Focusing, I identified it as the silhouette of Big Thunder Mountain Railroad. The match between the two was unmistakably similar.

Jason and Amanda stood slightly behind me on either shoulder, Stitch behind them.

"What is it?" Jason asked, his voice somewhere below a whisper. It sounded like music at that volume. For a moment, I couldn't think.

I pointed down, stepping off the Hidden Mickey.

"That's a familiar shape," Jason muttered.

"Oh my goodness," Amanda said. "The drain's the head!"

"And?" Jason asked me hopefully.

"Wayne was right." I collected myself, trying to calm down, still not trusting my imagination or wanting the role of team scout. "The minute I touched it, I saw smoke. Falling. An explosion." I hesitated. "Lightning."

I didn't tell them the rest; I couldn't convince myself if I'd "seen" it or was making it up. The waking dreams were so wildly different than my sleeping dreams. I pulled out a piece of paper and sketched out a bolt of lightning. As I did, I heard Jason speak.

There is the sound of a crane roaring nearby. Voices shout instructions. The approaching storm flashes and cracks. A mechanical whine is interrupted by a ripple of the fire that continues to pour from rents in the earth.

Lightning strikes the ground not a quarter mile away with an explosive sound, like TNT detonating. A cheer rises from the OT workers. A light rain begins to fall. Small drops that quickly approach the size of acorns.

I looked up from my sketch. "Who are you? How are you able to do that, explain everything that's running through my head so perfectly?"

Turning around to confront him, I was faced with Jason's inquisitive expression. Stitch was picking a feather from his teeth with a pointed nail. Over my opposite shoulder Amanda's gaze was fixed on Big Thunder Mountain in the distance.

I knew immediately it wasn't Jason's voice I'd heard, that it hadn't been him describing the scene to me. Though I was tempted to ask if anyone else had heard the ominous words, I kept my mouth shut, embarrassed and self-conscious.

I turned back to my drawing adding a piece of a crane, raindrops, the smoke of an explosion. Only then, with the added detail, did I feel as I did when I came out of a dream at night, my hand eager for something to draw with.

I'd seen the future.

AMANDA NEEDED TIME TO REST. While she lay down on a bench, Jason and I sat together nearby. For a few precious minutes, I saw the wonder of the park and felt its magic again. There was something special here, something pure.

In the initial silence, I felt my heart race. I didn't want to reveal how eager I was for

conversation. I was free of Mrs. Nash's house, briefly free of Mandy and the Keepers and the obsessive life we'd all been leading for too long now.

"Are you always so intense?" he asked.

For a fraction of a second I took him seriously. Heat flooding my cheeks, I looked down at my running shoes wishing I was wearing *anything* but running shoes.

"And obnoxious," I said.

He laughed, a deep throated, guttural sound.

"You and your sister...you're brave. Unusual. Interesting."

"She's not actually my sister. People just seem to see us that way."

"Oh."

"Not that it matters."

"OK."

"You like being an Imagineer?"

"Tonight I do."

That shut me up. I tried to swallow but I had dry mouth. "Me, too. Not the Imagineer part."

He contained a smile. It made his eyes seem all the brighter.

"So, if you touch my hand, do you see my future?"

I exhaled audibly and looked out into a crepe paper, Creamsicle sky.

"You get that a lot, don't you?" he asked.

I didn't answer.

"Sorry."

"No big. And no, I don't get it a lot because basically no one knows what my deal is. I'm the quiet girl. That's all."

"But are you? Quiet?"

"I can be. Sometimes. I like to have fun."

"Is this fun?"

"For me, yeah."

"Me, too," he said.

"I don't hold hands on the first date," I said, locking my eyes with his.

His eyes laughed. He said, "No, I imagine that could be scary for you." He hesitated. "Is it weird?"

"Having dreams that can come true? What do you think?"

"I think I'd be afraid to go to sleep."

"That'd explain the rings under my eyes."

He leaned in close, so close he stole the air from all around us because I couldn't catch my breath; I didn't know whether to move closer or stay still.

"I don't see any," he said.

"No?"

"No makeup, either, which is nice."

"You wouldn't say that if it wasn't pitch black out."

"I think I would." He leaned back. I wished he'd stayed close. "I see a sky like that," he said, "and it reminds me of a long, flat beach at low tide. The ripples in the sand like fish bones."

I was about to tease him about being a poet, but if I did he might stop, and I didn't want him to. "Nice image."

"Lit major. Busted."

"I love books," I said. "No matter how much I touch them they only give me good dreams."

"Don't read Stephen King."

"Are you kidding? I'll bet every Fairlie—every kid like Amanda and me, I mean—has read *Firestarter* five times."

Another laugh. "I can see that!"

"It's like an owner's manual for us."

"You know, I know you guys get into the parks all the time, so there's nothing special here I can offer you — and by 'you' I mean you, Jess, not all of you. But if you'd ever like to wander around, get a tour of the changes at Downtown Disney, I'd be happy...I mean, we could do that

together or something.”

“Sure.”

“For real?” He gave me his number and I called it from my phone. We both saved the information. Two of us brushing away at our screens on a bench in the Magic Kingdom. For a minute I could imagine that this spark of connection wasn’t as weird as it actually was.

Amanda snorted and stirred.

“Dang.”

That was maybe the nicest thing he’d said to me yet.

JASON, AMANDA, AND I ARRIVED BACKSTAGE near Thunder Mountain a half hour later.

“Am I the only one who’s nervous about this?” Amanda whispered. She had good reason to be concerned: during an early experience as DHI Keepers, Finn and Philby had been attacked by a giant T. rex skeleton in this attraction.

“We’re close.” An invisible string pulled me. I’d felt this same force before and had come to trust it.

Amanda shivered. “Didn’t need to hear that.”

“Where do we go?” I asked.

Jason nodded. “Just FYI: Imagineers don’t admit to the existence of these shapes.”

“But you must, or why are we here? You told us…” My voice trailed off as I saw a look in his eye. “Wait! You’re not going to help me?” I couldn’t believe what he was saying. “What were we doing up on the roof?”

“You directed us there, not me,” he said.

“Really?” Amanda’s antagonism wasn’t going to help anything. “We need your help here.”

“You’re doing fine,” Jason said.

“He *is* helping, Mandy!” I wasn’t sure why I was defending Jason, but it felt right. “Cut him some slack.”

“Slack? This was his idea!”

“I’m right here,” Jason said. “And technically, it was Wayne’s idea. It’s important to distinguish between ideas and hunches.”

I thought I understood. “As an Imagineer, you’re sworn to an oath,” I said.

The look on Jason’s face gave nothing away.

I told Amanda, “He’s sworn to an oath to never admit the existence of the Hidden Mickeys. Maybe more an understanding than an oath. Whatever, he won’t violate that trust placed in him, cannot violate it.”

Jason did nothing to correct me. On the contrary, his eyes sparkled; he was impressed. I felt that clear down to my toes. “He can help us to a point, but the rest is up to us.”

Jason’s eyes thanked me. Eyes difficult to look away from.

“We’re putting ourselves at risk here!” Amanda complained, touching the dried blood in her hair. “For some hocus pocus? Seriously?”

“The three of us know that what I’ve been dreaming is important—super important—or Wayne wouldn’t have us taking these risks. It adds up to something, means something. I can feel that.”

Jason nodded. “You two are the gifted ones. Not me. You think this is all, what, chance? That chance brought you here five years ago? Seriously?”

I found myself swallowing away a shortness of breath.

“You’re freaking me out now,” Amanda said, winning a smile from Jason.

“Wayne has plans that the Imagineers can’t even imagine. The only choice is to move forward.”

“How are we supposed to do that?” I asked. “What do we do now?”

“Wayne said to tell you it’s a five letter word that starts and ends with the same letter. There’s a piece of old metal in the middle.”

“Are his riddles really from Walt?” I asked, shaking my head.

“*Trust!*” Amanda said like a proud schoolgirl.

Jason ignored my question. I didn’t like that. He addressed Amanda. “See? Not so tough.” He turned toward me. “Do we start at the beginning or the end?”

“I have no idea.”

“I think you do,” he said.

“Whichever’s closer,” I blurted out.

“There!” He looked at me proudly. I hoped I wasn’t blushing, but feared I was.

HOLDING IN SHADOW, moving slowly, and pausing for long stretches of time, Jason led us to the exit of Big Thunder Mountain Railroad. This kind of night time searching was more the Keepers’ thing than ours. I was uncomfortable, and I could tell Amanda was as well. She had this overly protective attitude around me; she’d suffered badly both times I’d been abducted by the Overtakers, something I regretted but had no power over. She considered it her mission to keep me safe. Seeing that she had all the physical power and I had the mental weirdness, I appreciated her concern and protection, but it could be suffocating as it was now. She wouldn’t allow more than a yard to separate us.

“Wayne asked me to wait here,” Jason said, at the mouth of the exit.

“Wait a second!” Amanda yipped. “He knew we were coming here?”

Jason raised his hands in surrender. “I do what I’m asked.”

I took Amanda by the hand. “Thank you, Jason. Will we see you again?” I tried not to sound too hopeful.

“I hope so.” He cleared his throat. “Remember, Jess, that solution to the riddle is your best defense.”

“Trust,” I whispered. “We’ll remember that. I’ll remember it.”

“Take care of yourself,” he said. Was I reading too much into his concern? “And remember,” he warned Amanda. “Mining tunnels are often fragile, precarious places. Be careful with your power.”

She glared at him as if to say: “I didn’t need to hear that.”

But she had needed to hear that, and I, for one, was glad for the reminder.

“Stick around,” I said to him.

Amanda and I headed off into the gray gloom of the exit line.

“Stay alert,” I warned her.

“I’m not exactly dozing off.”

“You were *asleep* a while ago.”

“Leave it alone,” she said. “I didn’t see you complaining.”

A geyser erupted alongside of us and I jumped but did not squeal as Amanda did. Tempted to tell her the operating geyser meant the attraction was up and running, not shut down for the night, I elected otherwise. We’d heard so many stories from the Keepers nothing would surprise us. By the way Amanda was moving so slowly, I knew she knew what I knew.

I felt something strong within moments of entering the mine itself and looked around but it was too dark. I put the sensation down to nerves. Amanda was moving like a ninja. We were drawn toward an orange glow deep within.

“You realize,” Amanda whispered, “that if that’s what I think it is—a torch—then someone lit it. It’s not as if they have torches burning during park hours.”

“Hidden Mickeys. Focus!”

“How can I focus if I can’t see?”

“Ha ha.”

We continued ahead and reached what was, in fact, a burning torch. It hung from the wall in a wrought iron holder in the area where the attraction’s train both ended and started.

“What now?” Amanda asked as I removed the torch and held its flame out in front like a flashlight. “Which way?”

The tracks went right and left.

“Dunno,” I said.

“That’s helpful.”

“I think we go that way,” I said, pointing with the torch across the tracks.

“The waiting line?”

“I guess so.”

“It’s new, you know?”

I didn’t know. Amanda stayed up with the Keepers and the park news much more than I.

“They’ve made it interactive. Made it longer, I think. It was closed forever. But if you wanted to go to the waiting line, why did we start in the exit?”

I thought back to the pull I’d felt early on. I considered telling her about it but thought she might force me to go back and start again. At the moment that felt wrong; I was being pulled across the tracks. “This way,” I said, lowering myself down and dropping onto the tracks.

“Don’t!”

It was only a matter of a few feet across to the organized slots that held awaiting passengers in neat little lines. I didn’t get what she was so upset about.

As I hit the track, I could hear that voice repeating what I’d heard on the roof.

Amanda jumped down behind me, startling me. I turned to scold her for playing tricks on me when I was so wound up. As I did, I saw a small locomotive coming at me at full speed.

Mandy shoved me across the tracks and I scrambled to get out. But in doing so, she slipped and fell and was sitting on the railroad ties. I froze, one leg up on the platform, my fingers dug in holding me.

I threw my arm to her, willing her to take hold, but her palms were raised, facing away from her and, as the voice cleared from my head, a screeching of metal on metal rose like an animal cry. The locomotive shuddered as it slowed. Mandy shook, head to toe. The train cars buckled behind the straining locomotive. It slowed, but only briefly.

I pulled myself up, as Amanda stood and leapt. She touched one foot down before vaulting up to safety.

The train raced past, indifferent to us. *Clickety-clack*, it was gone as fast as it had arrived.

Both of us were lying on the platform, face down, out of breath. Amanda gave me a look that pained me.

“I’m sorry,” I gasped.

“We make decisions together,” she said. I recovered the torch, still burning. Amanda looked older, overcome with the fatigue her power could sap from her.

“Together,” I said, sitting to back down to rest as well. We needed a minute to recover.

THUNDER MOUNTAIN’S WAITING LINE had been redesigned with gold bars that glittered, mining mechanisms of all shapes and sizes, gilded canary cages, bright posters, and busy displays. But as far as we could see by the flickering light of the torch, there were no Hidden Mickeys.

“You understand,” Amanda said, “that we’re not supposed to be able to see them?”

“Yeah.”

“So it’s not surprising that we aren’t. Seeing them, I mean. If they weren’t well hidden, they’d have a different name.”

“I got it the first time.”

“No reason to get feisty,” she said.

“There is a reason,” I countered. “You’re treating me like I’m an idiot. I’m always treated like there’s something wrong with me, instead of something incredibly right. You, with your power to push...everyone sees you as a superhero. But because people can’t see what I do, because it’s all in my head, I’m some sort of weirdo. A witch. A savant.”

“Hardly.”

“That’s because you’re over there, and I’m over here.”

We’d reached the end of the inside waiting line. The track was long, and progressing through it took us at least ten minutes. I was glad to be back out in the fresh air; every minute we’d spent inside, I’d expected Overtakers to attack us. It put me on edge. Now I could see below us to where the path started. We’d be there in a matter of minutes if we hurried.

Next to me, though, Amanda was moving so slowly. I could tell the open air scared her more than it reassured her.

“We’ll circle around,” I said, “and meet Jason on the other side.”

“Look!” She pointed at a cactus patch along the path.

“Not a place I’d like to hide.”

She waved the torch toward the cacti. On one of the plants, three discs of prickly pear had grown together, forming the shape of Mickey’s head.

“A place where most people would never touch it,” Amanda murmured.

“Do I have to?”

“I think you do.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that.” I tried to see how I could get in there without getting shredded. “I think I’d rather not.”

But we both knew I was going to.

“This torch is freaking me out,” Amanda said. “It’s like I’m trying to make sure the Overtakers see us.”

“Do not put that thing out. If I can’t see where I’m going, I’m staying put.”

She lowered the torch to the path. “Okay, but hurry.”

“You don’t hurry into a cactus patch,” I said.

Taking a deep breath, I picked a route. I would need to duck, move left, turn right, and come around behind the plant if I were to have any chance. Still, I dreaded the idea.

“You gotta do this,” she said.

I moved one careful step at a time, keeping my face away from the cactus stems, which looked like prickly green ping-pong paddles. I held my hair close to my shoulder. We used to play limbo in Barracks 14—you tried to arch back far enough to pass beneath a bar held at different heights—but I was never very good at it. I didn’t think of myself as limber or athletic.

As if to prove me right, the cactus scratched my shoulder blade, and across my calves.

“What if the Overtakers made these things poisonous?” I asked Amanda.

“Then we’ll know in a minute.”

“You stopped being funny in seventh grade. You know that, right?”

“We were homeschooled in the Barracks. We never went to seventh grade.”

“But if we had.” I moved a few more feet, turned nearly a full circle, and backed up a step. Another few feet and I’d be within reach of the Mickey.

“Shh! Quiet!” Amanda stabbed the torch into the earth, snuffing it. Turning around, she jumped over a chain and disappeared behind some boulders.

I heard them then: at least two men, their voices coming from the darkness of the entrance line.

“I told you,” one of them said. “Nothing.”

Squatting uncomfortably, I held absolutely still. There was nowhere and no way to hide. I was there to be seen if they looked. But it was dark, and I was off-trail, and I hoped that would be enough.

“Don’t matter. We do what we’re told to do,” said the other. “Better than being down the hole.”

“Got that right.”

“Sides, something tripped the alarms.”

“Characters. It’s always characters. When has it been anything but?”

“How should I know? You trying to trick me with a question like that?” The man sounded angry.

“No, Chad. I am *not* trying to trick you.”

“I don’t like no one playing no tricks on me.”

“I know. I’m well aware of that.”

“You remember Stu?”

“It was Lou. And yes. I remember.”

They stopped only a few feet away; they had their backs to me, and were therefore facing Amanda’s hiding place. They looked filthy, covered in black, oily grime. Real miners. The map Amanda and I had passed in the waiting line depicted all sorts of interconnecting tunnels beneath Thunder Mountain. I’d thought they were just part of the fantasy. Seeing these two, I wondered.

“I smell mangoes. You smell mangoes?” The thinner of the two sniffed the air like a bloodhound.

Amanda’s shampoo. I’d told her how strong the scent was. Maybe now she’d believe me. I considered trying to distract them, but I was completely exposed. If they turned and looked down, I was busted. Surrounded by prickly pear, I wouldn’t exactly be able to get a head start.

Slowly, Amanda rose up from behind the rock. She was crazy if she thought she was strong enough to *push*. I jumped to my feet.

"It's me you want!"

The miners spun around in surprise, their backs to Amanda. She took advantage, ran for them and physically shoved them from behind. They fell into the cactus. The more they wrestled to get free, the more they got pricked.

As they struggled, the big Mickey piece bent toward me. I defended myself to keep it from scratching me, but in doing so, I made contact.

Philby runs across the bridge toward Amanda. He will not make it. He falls like a stone, though somehow he keeps from screaming. Keepers don't scream.

There's the sound of an explosion, but no sparks, no flames...just an epic crash that challenges the shattering heavens for bragging rights.

The trick was staying low. I lay down and slipped free of the cactus patch as the two miners wrestled themselves deeper and more painfully into it.

Together, Amanda and I ran. She was giggling from nervous tension.

"We need to get back in there!" she said. "That's going to be impossible now."

"No," I said. "We're good."

She craned her neck to check on me—I was a slower runner—and I nodded.

We circled around and caught up to Jason. I explained quickly about the devastation I'd "seen", and how it involved a bridge. I included Philby in my description but left out Amanda, not knowing whether or not that was the right thing to do. But I knew how she worried, and I loved her more than anyone or anything. I didn't want to cause her concern over something as uncertain as my visions.

"The two bridges I can think of for the main railroad," Jason said, "are the Frontierland station and the Main Street station. They're not exactly bridges, but they're elevated. There's also the monorail, Tomorrowland's PeopleMover, and Big Thunder Mountain here. What am I missing?" He hesitated. "We'll start with Frontierland."

Jason led us backstage via a Cast Member door. Because we knew the miners had spotted us, we stayed alert for other Overtakers. The railroad station was located behind Splash Mountain, and that attraction was known to have serious Overtaker connections.

Jason seemed distracted. It felt like something about my bridge vision had set him on edge. We walked in silence. Soon, we emerged from backstage onto the stairs at the base of the Frontierland Railroad Station.

Amanda and I followed Jason up the long stairway. My skin prickled as a flash of movement caught my eye, but when I looked to the side, I saw nothing.

"You okay?" Amanda asked.

I told her and Jason what I thought I'd seen.

"Keep alert," Jason said. "Once we're up there, we'll be a little isolated."

"Is it even possible to be a 'little isolated?'" Amanda snapped at him.

Jason took her words in stride. I so appreciated that he wasn't the combative type. I got enough aggression from the Overtakers.

We reached the station's platform. Beyond the main queue, there were several small rooms.

"It isn't safe here," I said. Not a vision, but a pronounced feeling of urgency.

"Because?" Amanda asked.

"Just my gut."

"I trust your instincts," Jason said. "I don't know of any Hidden Mickeys up here, but then again, their location is constantly changing. We'll be fast."

We separated and began our search. The Hidden Mickeys were so easily overlooked that we had to take our time, to look at both the broad landscape and the small, minute details.

I felt a rumble rise up through my feet and legs. "Should the train be running?" I called to Jason. His face knotted in concern, making his answer unnecessary.

Each of us immediately moved in the direction of the nearest stairs. Then we stopped as one,

like a trio of dancers.

The top of the stairs was blocked.

Three teenagers stood facing us, their eyes glowing green in the dim moonlight. These were OTKs—Overtaker Kids—regular teenagers who had been coerced and enchanted by the Overtakers, forced by magic to join the OTs in battle.

The OTKs slinked toward us like a pack of wolves, forcing Amanda, Jason, and me closer together.

“I can *push* if I have to,” Amanda whispered.

“You’re too weak,” I said.

“I can try.”

“We’d love to hear what you’re talking about,” called a tall girl with stringy brown hair. I’d never seen her before.

Jason had us walking slowly backwards—but we didn’t have much further to go. The train pulled into the station behind, and then alongside, us.

Amanda glanced back. “No way.”

Greg Luowski, a bully from school and a known associate of the Overtakers, along with a smaller kid with vivid green eyes, arrived onto the platform from a second staircase to our right.

We were trapped.

“You know you’re on the wrong side, don’t you?” I called out to them. “Good always wins when it comes to Disney.”

“Says the girl who’s about to lose,” retorted the OTK.

“Steady...” whispered Jason. “They’ve overlooked something.”

“What’s that, old man?” Luowski shouted.

Jason raised his voice. “I was telling the girls to obey you. We are clearly outnumbered.”

“You’re out of luck, is what you are,” said Luowski. “We get the twofer: the old Imagineer and the Dream Girl. I’m going to get me a medal.”

“Have you ever tried a double push?” Jason said it so softly I barely heard him. He continued, “Jess, you will pull her with us.”

Amanda hadn’t answered him. I doubted she’d ever tried the sort of thing Jason was suggesting, and I knew that if she did, she’d be sapped of every speck of energy she possessed.

Pull her *where*? I wondered. *When*?

Jason answered as if reading my mind. “Train.”

“I said, no talking!” shouted the girl. She and her partners were incredibly close to us now, as was Luowski and his sidekick. I’d lost track of them during Jason’s instructions.

“Are you planning to beat us up?” Amanda asked, baiting them, drawing them closer.

I couldn’t be sure if my future-casting abilities allowed me to sense what happened next, or if there is some small part of all of us that can perceive certain events a fraction of a second before they happen. Whatever the case, I knew the train was going to start rolling. And I knew Amanda was raising her arms before they could move.

I grabbed Amanda by the collar and pulled her off her feet. She *pushed* to both sides, like a traffic cop. The force she delivered actually jolted Luowski upward like she’d hit him below the chin; the girl and the two others moved their feet, but failed to advance, like they’d hit an invisible wall.

Jason grabbed Luowski and the girl by their clothing and dragged them toward the train, which was now moving out of the station. It felt *so good* to see Luowski struggling like a six-year-old. I caught myself about to cheer for Jason’s heroics.

Amanda held the others off, but I could feel her wilting. Each step back shortened; her knees buckled. I threaded my arms under hers and let her sag into me as we stumbled together.

The train continued to pick up speed. Amanda and I weren’t going to make it. Jason called out for us, but I barely heard him. My attention was split between Amanda’s weakening condition and the other OTKs.

I backed Amanda up to the edge of the platform. Another step, and we would fall onto the tracks.

As the train chugged away, I heard what sounded like the buzz of hummingbird wings. Pinned down and surrounded by the OTKs, I saw no choice but to fight. I knew Amanda would be useless; she might be able to walk, even run, but she'd have no strength for a battle.

I threw my hands up. "Okay, we sur—"

Before I could get the word out, the Fairies covered the OTKs like veils. Fawn, Rosetta, Periwinkle, Tinker Bell, Iridessa, Vidia, and Silvermist hovered and buzzed in front of the faces of each of our adversaries.

While they were distracted, Silvermist spun around and motioned for me to go. As she took her eyes off her OTK, the kid swatted her away with an open hand. I couldn't see what happened next, and for a moment, I thought we'd lost her. Then she came buzzing past me, one hand outstretched, and rammed one of the kids. He cried out. She kicked his front teeth.

The kid staggered back.

I spotted an exit ramp, easily overlooked. At the same time, my eye caught on the wrought iron ornamental design rimming the roof of the train terminal. The shapes were small and looked like pineapples on top of a monkey's head. Until the light shone *through* one, that is, and I saw that they weren't monkeys at all; they were Mickeys.

There was no way I was going to be able to touch one, which I regretted, but somehow the sight of so many Mickeys strung together like paper dolls reminded me of tentacles and suction cups—something I could add to my sketch later.

Amanda had regained some strength by the time we reached the ramp. We glanced back and saw the OTKs were still struggling to fight off a sky full of angry Fairies.

"Where...to?" Amanda gasped as we ran side by side toward the Plaza.

"Fantasyland," I said. Before she could ask why, I answered. "The cracked glass from my dream. Bad luck if it's a mirror, and we all know who loves to look at herself in mirrors."

"Are you crazy? The Evil Queen?"

"Finn buried her in Mexico. If she's here, she's a fake. And hey, without Wayne or Jason to guide us, you're stuck with me. This feels right. Wish I could explain it better."

"Don't eat any apples if anyone offers them to you."

"Ha ha."

"And don't trust any sorry-looking old ladies."

Fantasyland was steeped in a late-night, low-hanging ground fog. It looked like it belonged on another continent, like there was no way it was less than a quarter mile from the Frontierland Railroad Station. With each step we took, the fog swirled around our ankles and knees. In patches it rose over our heads; in others, it swallowed us whole.

"I don't see the point of this," Amanda complained. "Fantasyland is too new. The Seven Dwarfs Mine isn't open yet. Have you heard of a single Hidden Mickey in here?"

"But that *is* the point," I countered. "Maybe there are Hidden Mickeys no one has found yet. Maybe we'll be the first! That might make them more important."

"Or maybe we'll get lost in the fog and fall off the edge of the earth."

"What's bugging you, other than being attacked by roaming gangs of green-eyed kids and losing the one guy who was willing to help us?"

I was hoping to make our experiences something she could laugh at, but Mandy took me seriously.

"You saw fire and lighting," she said. "I don't see how a foggy path in a brand new part of the park could possibly help us figure out what that means. It feels like we're lost."

"We're not lost, we're hiding," I said. "I was drawn here, and look, there's fog to cover us. I saw cracks, too, remember? As in glass. As in a mirror, like I said. Look, Mandy, I don't have any better ideas. I wish I did."

"Well, if you're looking for the Evil Queen, she's got to be somewhere on the Seven Dwarfs Mine Train. But as far as I'm concerned: no more mines!"

"I'd rather stay away, too," I admitted. "Hidden Mickeys and mirrors. Cracked glass. Cracked stone."

"We already tried that in the castle."

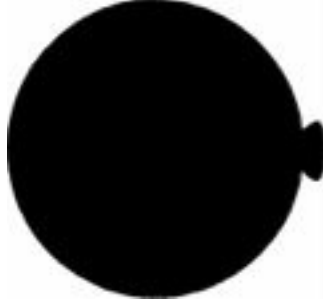
“You’re not even trying to help.”

“I’m *trying* to keep us alive.”

“Wayne’s whole deal is this: something bad is coming. The Keepers are part of it, which makes you and me a part of it, too. Stop me when I’m wrong.”

I allowed a few seconds of silence to pass; Amanda didn’t say anything. The fog hovered twenty feet overhead. We were near Gaston’s Tavern, and approaching the statue out front. A pair of lantern lights flickered on either side of the tavern’s door.

Sensing something strong, I stopped and closed my eyes. I saw a round head in profile, but with only one ear. I took a moment to sketch it so I wouldn’t forget.



Amanda waited for me, and kept quiet while I worked on my drawing. She was always kind and patient with my visions, able to allow for my process. Typical me, I became so consumed in the sketch that by the time I looked up I’d lost track of her.

“Mandy?”

There she was. She’d unhooked one of the lanterns and was carrying it over to a lamppost on the left of the building. She climbed onto the stone base and shinnied up the square post, holding the flickering lantern at arm’s length.

I kept my voice low as I hissed, “What...are...you...doing!?”

“You’ll see. I think!” she fired back as she scrambled over the tavern’s thatched lower roof. She disappeared from view, and I was beginning to worry about her, a yellow glow rose from the far side of the building’s central, higher roofline.

There was Amanda, clear up at the top, holding the lantern aloft.

I had some choice words for her, but I wasn’t going to raise my voice and risk being overheard or spotted. And of course, I knew Amanda well enough to understand that she wasn’t playing games. Amanda was no kid anymore. Though she enjoyed a good time, like me she’d left childhood behind a long time ago. Too long.

What was she playing at now? I thought she must be signaling someone, but who? Wayne? She had to know, too, that it was most likely she’d attract Overtakers. It seemed like a death wish. I waved and jumped and clapped my hands, trying to win her attention and get her down from the roof.

She held the lantern still and pointed to Gaston’s statue. I shrugged, letting her know I had no idea what was going on. Again, she pointed, this time more vigorously.

Enchanted Belle was not exactly where she was pointing, but it was probably the closest attraction in that direction. I offered her another shrug, clearly frustrating her. She pointed to her left and right. A second later, I realized that she might be indicating the window dormers arching out of the roof.

But then there she was, gesticulating wildly again at Gaston’s burbling statue.

I jumped up onto the rim of the fountain, wondering if she was trying to tell me to look into the water. Nothing. I worked my way around the rim, back to front—

And paused, my gasp unheard over the gushing of the fountain.

The lamp’s yellowish light threw shadows off the window dormers onto the cobblestone street. I understood why Amanda had been dancing around up there, moving the lantern back and forth, and why she was currently holding it deathly still—the vision was all about placement. The two dormers’ arched crowns cast shadows that fit perfectly against the round fountain, forming Mickey ears. Using the lantern, Amanda had made a huge hidden Mickey. Perhaps on certain moonlit nights, this same

phenomenon would appear naturally. Who knew?

I signaled her to come down and met her at the base of the streetlamp.

“How did you ever—” I began.

“You aren’t the only one who sees things!” she said, breathless.

“What now?”

“It means something. I know it does. Like you’ve always said: in here.” She put a hand on her heart. “I can feel it.”

We approached the statue.

“You realize that anyone on this side of the Plaza could have seen you up there, right? Every OTK in the park is probably sprinting toward us right now.”

“Which is why it would be a good idea if we hurried.”

“We were looking for a cracked mirror.”

“From up there on the roof,” Amanda said, “the stone surrounding the fountain looks like it’s cracked. I promise you, Jess: this means something.”

By now, Amanda had reached the large plaque in front of the statue. She pushed on the letters, attempted to turn the metal plate. When that didn’t work, she applied pressure to the rocks of the low pillar supporting the plaque.

“Hello?” I said. “OTKs? Remember?”

“Look at this thing. It looks like a chimney.” It did. “It’s a big pillar of rock, waist high, but all it does is hold up some stupid plaque.” No argument. “How’s that possible?”

“Concrete blocks. Mortar,” I said.

“No, no! I mean, why bother? Put the plaque on the ground.”

“It might look like a gravestone.”

“You don’t have to build this thing!” She kept pulling, twisting, pushing.

I suddenly saw it through her eyes. It was a vent or a secret entrance! If the plaque moved out of place, it would open up a gap the perfect size to climb down into.

“You’re right! It’s ridiculously overbuilt.”

“But how...?” She was going to pull a muscle if she kept up her frantic search.

“The statue,” I said, throwing my legs over the lip of the fountain and stepping gingerly into the cold water. “Guests aren’t allowed into the fountain, so no one would ever find the latch if it was concealed on the statue.”

“You...are...brilliant!”

We attacked the bronze Gaston and LeFou, searching desperately, hoping a leg or an ankle would bend, that a wrist would move and something magical would happen.

Instead, we heard voices. Boys’ voices. Angry voices, at a distance but getting closer.

Then the voices went quiet, and we were scared.

AMANDA PULLED DOWN THE LID on LeFou’s beer stein. Immediately, water stopped pouring from it and from the barrel that filled Gaston’s stein to overflowing. Under our feet, I could both feel and hear a set of gears grinding, as if the waterpower was being directed elsewhere. The plaque pivoted on its upper corner. Amanda’s eyes lit up with glee, and she gave me a brief hug.

We sloshed out of the fountain and up to the moving plaque in time to see the top of a metal ladder appear.

“Go!” Amanda shouted, shoving me from behind.

I clambered inside the narrow chimney. As I began to descend, I caught sight of a group of frenzied looking OTKs charging.

I reached out in the dark and inadvertently touched what felt like a lever on the stone wall. I pulled it. Again, the sound of gears and water. The plaque slid back into place, almost chopping off the hairy hand of a boy daring enough to try to stop it from closing.

Then, darkness.

We scurried down the long ladder, finally reaching solid ground—concrete, I thought. It was pitch black, the kind of disturbing dark I hadn’t experienced since Barracks 14. The memory made me feel sick.

“Jess?” Amanda’s voice quavered.

“I’m here.” There had to be lights, but I didn’t want to speculate on something if I couldn’t deliver. I felt around for a switch of any kind, and quickly determined that we were encased in an extremely narrow box or tunnel. With arms outstretched, I could touch the opposing concrete walls. Behind me was Amanda, and behind her, the ladder.

“Grab my shirt,” I said. My eyes ached from the effort of trying to see even the tiniest speck of light. Weird colorful orbs danced before my eyes. “Small steps. Follow me.”

My face hit a spider web. I nearly screamed, and contained myself only for the sake of Amanda. Scraping the sticky strings off my face and out of my hair, I continued forward, my hands keeping me centered between the two walls.

We turned twice. The first movement was almost undetectable; the second, a hard right. A yellow glow dawned in the distance. We gave audible sighs in unison.

“What’s that?” Amanda asked.

“Heaven,” I said dryly.

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING, it was the Utilidor, a network of underground tunnels stretching everywhere beneath the Magic Kingdom. Why an escape tunnel had been constructed from Gaston’s fountain to the Utilidor was unclear, but something told me it was directly related to the Kingdom Keepers’ confrontations with the Overtakers. Maybe the Imagineers had been conscious of the dangers any dead end could present to the Keepers.

I was wrong, of course.

Once there was enough light, the real reason became apparent: the ceiling of the narrow tunnel was crowded with heavy electrical cables, aluminum tubes, pipes, and conduits, all of which connected to boxes and other cables and conduits on the ceiling of the Utilidor. We’d discovered the power and communication utility tunnel for Fantasyland.

“Where to?” Amanda asked, verbalizing my exact thought.

I didn’t immediately answer her. 1) Because I didn’t have an answer. 2) Because I was focused on a line of golf carts parked at an angle only a few yards from us.

On their bumpers was the word PARGO along with a random number. We were looking at Pargos 4, 11, 7, and 19. Their batteries were charging via black cables thicker than a garden hose.

I ran to the first of the Pargos and nearly squealed when I saw a key in the ignition. It was a tiny, toy-like key, but after we disconnected the first cart’s charger, it started the cart, which was all that mattered.

As I slid in behind the wheel, I was shoved rudely.

“You’re the daydreamer,” Amanda said. “I’m driving.”

She had a point. I moved across the bench, yielding my spot to her.

“I repeat: where to?”

Amanda the Annoying. This was an unfamiliar side of her, and I wanted to say something, but I wasn’t in the mood for an argument. She and I were good for each other that way: we acted as each other’s personality check. We could tell each other anything, and we listened to one another most of the time.

But not now. Not here.

“Dinner,” I said.

“What?” She was clearly alarmed. “How can you—?”

“Plates. Dinner plates.”

I encouraged her to stay on our side of the thirty-foot wide tunnel, even though the thing was empty. We passed signs and doors and the occasional stack of wooden shipping pallets, filled with everything from drinking water to Darth Vader costumes. The tunnel system was used to supply the park with everything it needed, keeping such commerce off the streets above so that the park could maintain its charm. The Utilidor also allowed characters and Cast Members to move around the park without being seen.

That purpose played into our current mission beautifully. As long as the Overtakers weren’t down here, Amanda and I could zoom across the park undetected.

“When I was standing at the fountain,” I continued, “facing Gaston’s Pub—”

“Tavern!”

“Whatever...I saw this flash of white lights. Only I don't think they were lights. I think they were plates.”

“You're hungry?”

“I'm always hungry, but it's not that. It really was dinner plates, I think.”

“Paper plates?”

“I don't know. Could have been.” She took a sharp left, nearly throwing me out of the cart. I looked up at a sign on a wall: Cinderella Castle. “Where are we going?”

“Cinderella's Royal Table,” Amanda said. “Dinner plates.”

WE LEFT THE PARGO parked at the bottom of a nondescript white staircase marked “Cinderella's Royal Table.” The florescent emergency lighting turned my skin a sickly green color as I led the way upstairs, pausing every few steps to listen for pursuers. The Pargo wasn't exactly quiet in the vast empty Utilidor; by now it seemed like half the park was out looking for us. It was agonizingly slow going, but an Overtaker attack would delay us even more.

“How much further?” Amanda whispered in my ear.

I shrugged. My gut told me that when we saw the door, I'd know it, but it also neglected to tell me how much further it might be. The entry into Cinderella's Royal Table could've been one of the half-dozen doors we'd already passed. The stairwell didn't offer many places to hide. If the OTs attacked, we'd be trapped.

Arriving at the next landing, I smiled at the sight of an oak door decorated with a coat of arms and hinged to the wall with iron strapping. Save the metal panic bar, it definitely belonged in a castle.

“Found it,” I whispered, pointing.

Stepping through, we found ourselves in an alcove off of the throne room, at the spot where families took pictures with the princesses before heading upstairs to dine. Across the room, I recognized the trapdoor throne we'd used earlier as an alternate route into Escher's Keep.

“This way.”

With every creaking floorboard, I imagined an Overtaker lurking in the shadows, waiting. We reached the staircase. The carpet helped muffle our footsteps as we climbed.

But I was in too big a hurry. I didn't notice that the staircase ended, and I stepped up, reaching for a tread that didn't exist. Falling forward, I pulled a tablecloth down with me. Silver goblets and glassware crashed to the floor. Amanda and I froze, ready to run.

Several long seconds passed before I dared move again. I rolled off of my stomach and stood carefully, avoiding the broken glass. Amanda's eyes were wide with alarm.

“Oops.” I shrugged, embarrassed. The Cast Members would have some questions about the set in the morning.

“Be careful.” Amanda whispered fiercely—as though I needed reminding.

We picked our way across the minefield of tables, using the moonlight that streamed in from the floor-to-ceiling windows on the far wall to navigate. Peering out, I saw all of Fantasyland laid out below me.

“It's creepy that empty,” Amanda whispered. “Beautiful, but creepy.”

“I thought I'd get used to it after all these years, but I haven't,” I said.

“Sneaking around empty parks at night battling fictional villains? I don't think it's something you ever get used to. I think it's something you just learn to live with,” Amanda said. “Come on, kitchen's this way.”

I wasn't sure how Amanda knew the way, but soon we pushed through a pair of doors into the kitchen. My eyes went wide. Everything in here was enormous. We picked our way through the jungle of stainless steel and linoleum, the overall effect of the room overwhelming. “How are we ever going to find a plate in this maze?” I asked Amanda, turning to look at her in the hopes that she had a plan.

I saw a flash of movement on the edges of the room. A disk, hurtling toward us like a Frisbee. Overtakers!

“Duck!” I shouted, pulling Amanda down with me as the white projectile flew over our heads and shattered against the wall behind us, leaving a gash in the drywall.

“Found a plate,” Amanda quipped.

I spun, searching for our attacker. There! A flash of red ducked behind a countertop; in the next breath, another plate missed my cheek by inches. This time, it was hurled from behind us.

“There are two of them,” Amanda whispered.

In a crouch, Amanda and I made our way around a stainless steel kitchen island on wheels, keeping our backs against it as we settled on the opposite side.

“Now would be a good time for a plan,” Amanda whispered.

“Agreed,” I said, trying to think. “Follow me.”

As we crawled toward the rolling island. I grabbed a frying pan, gestured at the kitchen island, and leaned my shoulder to suggest we would move it. I held up one finger, two... We sent the island flying. But instead of crushing the character, it bounced off to the side sending cooking utensils everywhere.

A man stood up. He was roughly the size of a refrigerator. Gaston, from *Beauty and the Beast*. The real one, not the bronze one. His muscles stretched his shirt; his black hair was slicked back. In his story, he'd nearly won a hand-to-hand fight with the Beast. What chance did two teenage girls have against him? He appeared unfazed and unhurt despite being struck by a rolling, stainless steel island that had required both Amanda and me to move. Not a good sign.

He smiled as he stood, almost as though he wanted to tease us into a fight.

“No one throws kitchenware like Gaston,” I muttered under my breath.

“Well, well, well, who do we have here?” Gaston asked, towering above us.

“It's those Fairlies they were telling us about, boss.” A little man came scurrying around the island behind us. LeFou, Gaston's pint-sized overeager sidekick.

“I know that, you idiot,” Gaston retorted. “I wasn't asking you.”

LeFou looked puzzled, but had the presence of mind to keep quiet.

“Now, I've heard you two have been stirring up trouble in the park tonight,” Gaston continued.

“We don't like troublemakers around here, at least not of your variety. No, around here we deal with troublemakers in the same way we deal with beasts.”

He stepped toward us menacingly. I looked around the room for an escape. To reach the door, we'd have to go the long way around. Gaston would cut us off. The only other exit was directly behind him. We were stuck.

The rubber grip on my frying pan felt sticky with sweat. The collision hadn't affected Gaston one bit; I doubted my skillet would do much good. Standing beside me, Amanda swayed, still weakened from earlier, or dizzy with fear. Even if we could make a break for it, I doubted Amanda could run.

I spotted my reflection in a mirror above the sink. Jackpot. Gaston's vanity was legendary.

“Gaston, most honorable sir,” I began, “I am afraid you have something on your face.”

“Why yes, I see it too,” Amanda said, catching on. “It seems so wrong to have something covering up such a perfect cheek.”

“If you'd just come this way with us, we can fix it, and better admire your beauty,” I said, laying it on thick.

I didn't have much experience with guys, and especially not with vain guys, but our words seemed to be doing the trick.

“Why, thank you, ladies,” Gaston said, straightening up and allowing himself to be led to the mirror. “It is important to properly showcase my flawless complexion.”

“Here you go,” I handed him a dish towel and pointed to the mirror. “Just look right here. I'm sure you'll see it.”

Gaston studied himself. “I don't see a spot. But I do look good. Quite good. I'd venture to say I'm the handsomest man in the kingdom...” He flexed his biceps in the mirror, totally engrossed. Unnoticed, Amanda and I began to back away.

“Gaston,” LeFou said, trying to snap him out of his revelry. “Gaston!”

“Yes, LeFou?”

“The girls...” LeFou began.

We were almost to the door, but by my side, Amanda staggered, dropping briefly to one knee. As I'd feared, she was in no condition to run.

Gaston turned, cruelty written large on his face.

“Leave them be, Gaston,” said a mellifluous voice from behind us.

We turned to see Belle, the beauty from *Beauty and the Beast*. She stood in the doorway, her blue dress covering her ankles, her brown hair pinned up in a bun, her characteristic book tucked under one arm.

“Belle!” Gaston stepped away from us and immediately his whole demeanor changed. “I was just—”

“Returning to your tavern?” Belle suggested.

“Well, it’s just that my tavern’s lacking you,” Gaston said. “The most beautiful man? The most beautiful woman? We’d be the most perfect couple around.”

“My answer’s still no, Gaston. It’s always been no.”

“No one says no to Gaston,” LeFou piped up. Belle rolled her eyes.

“Just stop by,” Gaston said smoothly, smiling and leaning against a nearby sink, “we can polish my trophies together.”

A sly smile danced across Belle’s lips. “If you leave right now, Gaston, and you don’t bother these girls again, I just might visit you later.”

This proved to be all the motivation Gaston needed. He scrambled out of the room, LeFou struggling to keep up, on his stout little legs.

Amanda thanked Belle as I walked over to the plates. Looking at them, I hadn’t flashed on anything, so I picked one up and ran my hand over the porcelain surface. Nothing. Another. Nothing. I gave Amanda a little shake of my head, overwhelmed by disappointment. All this danger for a dead end.

“There must be something. Maybe it’s one specific plate,” Amanda suggested.

“It’s not that,” I said. “I can’t explain, but there’s something wrong with these plates, this place.”

“But white plates, in the Magic Kingdom. That’s this!”

“I know,” I sighed. “Besides, there’s no Hidden Mickey.”

“Excuse me,” Belle said, coming forward to join us. “I couldn’t help but overhear. White plates? A Hidden Mickey?”

We nodded our heads in unison.

“I may have a solution.”

Amanda and I were stunned into silence. I’d always liked Belle well enough, but meeting her face to face, I couldn’t help but feel starstruck. She was so gorgeous and kind.

“Tha—that’d be great,” I stuttered. “Wonderful!”

“There’s been a game in the Haunted Mansion—it’s been going on for years now. Apparently three plates are placed at a particular setting in the ballroom scene. Two smaller bread plates and one large entrée plate. When set up by Cast Members according to the official design, there is no Mickey. However, someone – I’m certainly not implicating the Imagineers -- move them around, placing the two smaller plates along the edge of the larger plate, creating—”

“A Mickey!” Amanda interrupted. “A Hidden Mickey! That’s it!”

“An idea—that’s all,” the bashful Belle replied.

“No! You’ve done it, Belle. I know you’ve done it!”

She blushed.

“I’m sorry we have to go,” I said. “Though I—we—would so enjoy spending more time with you. You are totally...enchanted!”

“You’re too kind,” she said, smiling gently.

We thanked her again, and I curtsied awkwardly, having no idea what had gotten into me. Belle returned my gesture with the most graceful dip of her head I’d ever seen.

Amanda and I went back the way we’d come, reaching the Utilidor without incident. As quietly as possible, we started up the Pargo and followed the signs toward Liberty Square.

“That was Belle, the real Belle!” Amanda said, clearly overwhelmed. “How cool was that?”

“I’m beginning to see why the Keepers think this is so special.”

STAIRWAY 23 LED US UP and backstage. It took a moment to get our bearings, but Amanda had it figured out. We found an alleyway between Peter Pan’s Flight and a warehouse-sized structure

on our right and moved cautiously through the Cast Members entrance into the park proper.

I understood then what the Keepers had spent all these years trying to describe. There were big differences between traveling around as a gang and moving as a duo. The disquieting stillness. The palpable sense of impending doom. Danger hung in the air like a mist through which we had to cut our way. With the peace and perfect joy of the daytime park absent, we faced an eerie replica. It looked so similar. But looks could be deceiving.

It didn't help that we were headed for the Haunted Mansion, a place where 999 souls called out for one more to join their ranks to make it an even thousand. The lightheartedness of that "story" played well during park hours. At night, alone and terrified, it felt more like a promise.

Someone will die.

There had been a time, certainly, when such threats felt preposterous. Dillard Cole's fate changed that. The Keepers and those around them, like Amanda and me, were at risk. It wasn't a game anymore.

We tucked ourselves behind a trash bin with a view of the Horseless Hearse and the covered waiting area. Beyond, the graveyard's gray pallor beckoned us—it would make a great hiding place if we could bring ourselves to spend time there.

"It can't be the front," Amanda said. "The stretch room won't be operating, so none of the doors will work. They're all electric. We need to enter through the exit."

"Which means that if you were going to guard one or the other, you'd pick the exit," I said. "We'll be walking into a trap."

"No one knows we're here."

"How do we know that?" I asked. "There could be other exits. Emergency ones."

"No doubt. But they'll be locked from the outside, too. Besides, all the attractions have intrusion alerts. Don't get Philby started about that one, by the way. He'll bore you to tears."

We snuck closer to the exit, climbed a wall, and dropped back down to our hands and knees. But we couldn't stay hidden for long. A minute later we ran smack into a wrought iron fence, waist high, with sharply pointed bars.

I didn't know the parks the way the Keepers did. Mandy was more familiar than I, but we were both surprised by what we saw through the fence.

"It's a pet cemetery," she said. "Those are *pets* on the gravestones."

"I caught that," I said.

I shifted toward the terrace below and Amanda grabbed my upper arm, stopping me. Only then did I spot the two black cats roaming the brick courtyard. Nowhere else would the sight of two cats send terror shooting straight through you.

The cats continued past, heading toward the hearse. Clearly we had to enter the attraction as stealthily as possible.

"I'm not going in there," I whispered. "Dead pets? No thank you."

"It's the only way. Dead pets or live Overtakers. Take your pick."

"What if the dead pets become live Overtakers?"

"There's always that," she said. "But we won't know 'til we try."

Amanda went first, up and over the threatening spikes. She eased down quietly into the dead leaves on the other side.

I felt freakishly alone.

I followed her inside.

WE LANDED NEXT TO A GRAVESTONE bearing a sculpture of a poodle on top. The little dog was raised on its haunches, front paws tucked in as if it were begging. It shouldn't have surprised me how *real* it looked; nor should it have surprised me what came next.

All of the tombs opened at once. We froze in terror. A concerto of grinding stone and concrete.

I took two quick steps and, not looking where I was going, smacked into a tree. Staggering back, I saw double. Amanda caught me as I slumped to the ground.

"Are you okay?" she asked, touching my forehead. A bump was already forming.

I discovered something I'd rather not have known: semiconsciousness is closely related to sleep. *I future flashed.*

Riding the tree limb like a saddle, Finn brings his legs up in time to avoid the fangs of the roaring jaguar. The beast snaps at air, falls, rights itself.

Leaps again.

Finn looks down at the trunk he used as a stool, hoping beyond hope that the jaguar lacks common sense. But no. The cat springs up onto the chest, moving as fluidly as rushing water.

Holding on for dear life, Finn scoots away from the snapping jaws. He spins around on the branch. The jaguar's wet nose is so close he can make out its leathery texture.

The cat's mouth opens wide, spit flying as it roars.

I felt someone shaking me and opened my eyes to see Amanda. Tears sparkled in her eyes. "Wake up! Wake up, Jess!"

I made the mistake of looking around me.

From each of the graves crawled the decrepit, rotted remains of a poodle, a duck, a hound, a cat. The animals pulled their exposed bones and scabs of flesh out of their burial holes with savage determination. When the poodle growled, exposing its teeth through a patchwork of flesh that should have been its face, I whimpered.

Animals panting and low, slurping growls. Dogs. Wild dogs. Dangerously close.

The pack of wild dogs is bearing down on Willa. They are scraggly, scruffy, drooling, ugly hounds with matted fur and savage eyes.

The horrifying growl of a dog startles Willa. Its nose is in the air, red and black gums displayed in a nasty snarl of broken teeth.

Raking my head so as to avert my eyes, I squeezed Amanda's hand and then heaved her off me, pushing her to the side as a decaying owl dove off a tree branch and aimed itself at me. Throwing up a hand, I caught its head. A dusty, filthy wing caught me in the mouth; I ate feathers. Spitting, crying out, I wrestled the zombie owl as it pecked at my neck with its hooked beak and scratched my chest with its sharpened talons.

Finally, I caught it by the wing and hurled it at the tree trunk. Doing so went against everything I was—I'd reacted purely on instinct.

The owl slammed into the bark, fluttered, and fell. But in the next instant, it was standing, picking at the broken bones in its wing. Only then did the terrible truth hit me.

"We can't hurt them! We can't kill them!" I jumped to my feet.

Amanda squirmed and rolled, throwing leaves up around her in a brown cloud. She was pulling at her ankles. It took me a moment to realize that they were tied together; another to understand that the thick rope binding her was no rope at all, but a snake. The thing had coiled around both her ankles multiple times. I could see its torn skin undulating and tightening.

Mandy was too scared to speak. The snake kept tightening its grip. I reached forward, but couldn't bring myself to touch it.

Amanda's terror-ridden expression changed all that. Her skin was bluish, her eyes bugging out of her head.

"Breathe!" I shouted.

A zombie dog approached, head to the ground, a bouquet of flowers locked in its jaw. Black, empty eye sockets stared at us. *Blind!* I realized. *It's blind!*

All the animals were missing their eyes. They were working off scent alone!

Squinting in total repugnance, I took the snake by the tail and began to unwrap it. The gentler I was, the less it resisted. Much of its body had some amount of meat and skin left on it, but sizeable

portions did not—just vertebrae. The feel of cold bones made me want to throw up. Amanda bent her knees allowing me to work beneath her upturned heels. She calmed considerably as she saw the snake uncoiling.

“I...I...”

“It’s all right,” I said, not wanting her to look around and see the drooling, blind hound three feet from her head. Another few steps, and the flowers were going to hit Amanda. I had to get the snake free before she reacted.

I sped up my effort—but carefully. If I moved too quickly, the thing tightened like it was made of metal. Two coils to go...

The owl scooted forward. I dropped the snake.

“What are you *doing*?” Amanda sat up, reaching for the snake.

“Wait!” I peeled off my top shirt—glad for the T-shirt beneath—and tossed it past Amanda to a spot roughly equidistant between the hound and the owl. Both animals turned toward it. “They’re blind,” I cried. “I’ve got this.”

The snake was mine. It buckled and danced as I held it, keeping my arm high in the air. I ran the decaying reptile over to my shirt and dropped it. The commotion must have provoked the hound and the owl, for there was an immediate frenzy of wings, the snapping of jaws, and some grotesque sounds I couldn’t identify.

I pulled Amanda up.

The three animals had quickly forgotten the smell of my shirt, distracted as they were by the tang of fetid, powdered blood. Amidst the melee, Amanda dared to leap forward, snag my shirt, and toss it to me.

We jumped the fence and landed on the other side just as the two patrolling cats leapt from the back terrace into the woods. They came at us without hesitation.

Their tiny bodies, malnourished and skinny with hunger, seemed to expand. It looked as if they were being filled with pressurized air. They grew from cat to bobcat to panther, first slowly and then incredibly fast, in the space of several bounding leaps up the hill. From semidomesticated to wild in no time.

Amanda spun.

“No!” I shouted, raising my arms. “Do *not* turn your back on them! Look directly at their eyes. Show your teeth. Growl and raise your arms. Spread your legs. Look as big as you can!” I led by example, clapping sharply.

The nearest panther skidded to a stop and then began lurching toward us in stalking mode. The other cat was a shoulder length behind the first.

“Louder!” I hollered.

Amanda and I growled and barked with all our might. Our small frames must have looked six feet tall and as wide as a barn.

The cats stopped.

I made one reflexive juke at them. I didn’t want to start a fight I knew we’d lose, but I didn’t cower. The lead cat jumped back. It slowly began to shrink.

“Am I really seeing this?” Amanda asked in a whisper.

“Yes! They’re getting smaller again!”

From panther, to bobcat, to kitty. I stomped my foot and they skittered out of sight.

They’re going to tell someone, I thought. *Somehow...*

“What happened to you?” Amanda asked hysterically. “I thought I was the action figure.”

Honestly, I had no idea what had possessed me in the past few minutes. “We shouldn’t have let them get away. We don’t have much time before they bring in reinforcements. If we’re going to do this, we’d better go now.”

“I read a book once where that thing was alive,” I said, turning to point out the red-eyed raven over the door. We were inside the Haunted Mansion, walking the Doom Buggy track backward, past the graveyard and around some turns. The glass ball that usually held Madame Leota’s head stood empty.

I wasn’t sure why I’d set off backward, but I wasn’t going to change directions now.

“I’ve heard the expression about your skin crawling so many times,” Amanda said. “It’s weird to actually feel it.”

“Enough of that.”

“I’m not allowed to be scared? I can’t help it, you know!”

“You need to. Help it. Stop it. Avoid talking about it. It isn’t helping.”

“Because you’re scared, too.”

“Petrified. This ride has always been creepy. And that’s with it turned on. I feel like I’m in that attic above the old church.”

I felt Amanda shiver. “You had to bring that up.”

“Sorry.”

“Where’s Mary Poppins when we need her?” Amanda said. We both smiled.

But not for long. The cavernous building had a life of its own—groaning. It was difficult to distinguish potential threats from ordinary sounds. Of all the places to be trapped in the dark, this was not the one I’d have chosen.

“I hate this place,” I muttered.

When Amanda didn’t immediately reply, I turned around. She had stopped fifteen feet behind me, staring at something.

“Mandy!” I hissed.

She gave no sign of having heard me. I hurried to her and followed her gaze.

“It’s just a door,” I said. “A prop. There’s nothing on the other side.”

Clunk! It sounded electric. But loud!

"Playful spooks have interrupted our tour. Please remain seated in your Doom Buggies. We will continue momentarily."

The buggies started moving. A green light appeared around the rim of the door, which started to bang open and shut. Pairs of ghost eyes appeared and disappeared in the pattern on the wallpaper.

“I saw something,” Amanda said. “A shadow in the door.”

“But it’s not a real door,” I said. To prove my point, I pushed the door, knowing it would only move a matter of inches.

To my surprise, it swung fully open, blinding us with a wash of that iridescent neon green light. “That wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“I told you,” she said, and took a step forward.

I grabbed hold of her arm. “No. We’re looking for plates, remember?”

“You know how stuff happens to you that you can’t explain?” Amanda said. “That’s me right now. I have to go in here. You don’t, if you don’t want to.”

“Of course I don’t want to! Should I list the reasons? A) This is the Haunted Mansion! B) That door is not supposed to open. C) Nothing but trouble can come from going through a door that’s not supposed to open in a place waiting for one more dead person. D) Did I mention, dead person?”

“So stay here. Scream your brains out if you see someone.”

“I can’t do that, and you know it. We do things together.”

“Yeah, well.”

I extended my arm to hold the door open and screened my eyes against the light with my other hand.

Amanda said, “Stay close.”

I’D EXPERIENCED MY FAIR SHARE of bone-chilling moments: being shipped off to Barracks 14 and studied like an amoeba under a microscope; having a spell put on me that left me in a trance for months; being imprisoned underground. But nothing prepared me for what Amanda and I now faced.

The walls of the small, glowing room were covered—as in: *covered*—with photographs, news articles, and sketches of Wayne Kresky. It was as if we’d stumbled on a stalker’s shrine to the mighty Imagineer, the man some believed was the engineer of the fight against the Overtakers. The general.

The dozens of photos had obviously been taken without Wayne’s knowledge. Some—more

than a few—including the DHIs, our friends, the Kingdom Keepers. But the way the photos had been trimmed, annotated with markers, or doodled left me sick to my stomach. Whoever had done this had drawn nooses, knives, and bloody wounds.

It was horrifying. I grew dizzy. Amanda caught me as I was about to faint.

“Out,” she said. “We have to get out!”

She half-dragged me to the door and pulled it shut behind us.

The Doom Buggies were rolling, complete with lights and sound effects. We worked our way along the side, moving in the opposite direction of the cars.

“What...was...that?” I croaked out.

“An abomination,” Amanda said. “Jealousy. Anger. Frustration. It makes me so mad. The Overtakers think they’re so high and mighty.”

“A spell room,” I said. “A place to—”

“Yes,” Amanda said. “A place where nothing good can happen.”

“And if it’s too late?” I asked.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Don’t even *think* like that!”

She stopped. I bumped into her. Amanda gave me her most severe look.

“Tell me you didn’t see anything in there,” she said softly.

“A fountain,” I whispered. “Mickey on top of a fountain. The Evil Queen.”

“Wayne?” she asked, her voice quavering.

I nodded solemnly, slowly. I wanted to remind her that I didn’t *want* to see such things. But how?

“I don’t have a choice, you know?”

She glared at me, her eyes unforgiving. Her look said, *Oh, yes you do!*

I shook my head no, trembling from head to toe.

Amanda said, “Do not tell me that room, what we saw in there, is what it’s all about!”

I shrugged. She’d told me not to tell her.

We reached the Haunted Mansion’s banquet scene without difficulty, but Amanda and I had to backtrack to find our way down. The Doom Buggies were on an elevated track, and the dinner action took place below. We found a staircase and descended; around us, ghosts danced and creepy voices called.

My sketch was no longer more empty than full. Quite the opposite. I’d added pieces I didn’t understand, but didn’t question. I wasn’t sure how much more remained.



Like a Tea-Party

I'd added Mickey's head to the watch for fun; had put in his Sorcerer's cap and a bunch of other stuff without knowing precisely why. It was all part of a creepy process I didn't understand. Where might this next Hidden Mickey lead us? What image could still fit onto the page? I honestly had no idea.

"There it is," Amanda said. "Exactly like Belle said."

Three plates in the shape of Mickey.

The ghosts continued to float and moan above us. I could picture them coming to life, dark wraiths intent on sucking our souls dry. *Is that something I'm supposed to draw?* I didn't dare. It felt like a thing I should let pass, something too dangerous to play with.

Then I "saw" something—a truth Amanda had no way of knowing.

"This is the end," I said. "This is where we stop."

"How can you possibly say that?" she quipped.

"I have no idea."

"Because she's right."

A man's voice. Amanda and I literally jumped off the floor. We turned in midair and landed running.

"Wait! It's me!"

Wayne! We stopped and looked back. He'd been sitting at the table all along.

We'd been looking right at him.

"How did you—?"

"Luck, I suppose," he said. "Intuition, perhaps. Not to mention that of all the alleged symbols in the Magic Kingdom, this is the most well-known. I should have thought of it from the beginning. It's the only one I can think of that changes regularly. Sometimes it's here, sometimes it's not."

"Tonight it is."

"Yes." He seemed okay with that. He clearly hadn't been touring the place.

"So, you beat us to it," I said.

"In a manner of speaking," Wayne said. "Let's just say I arrived before you did."

"What does that mean?" Amanda asked.

"I think she knows," Wayne said, staring me down with his mischievous blue eyes.

Did I? I had no idea what he was talking about. But Wayne was Mr. Riddles, and I knew from his probing eyes that he wanted me to figure this one out.

"I'm supposed to see something here," I speculated.

"Indeed."

"Something you two cannot."

"Goes without saying."

"The Hidden Mickey."

"It seems to have worked at the other spots."

"Absolutely," I said, holding up my drawing. "I've filled out my entire page!"

"There you go," he said.

"Have you already turned over the plates?" Amanda asked, voicing what I was thinking aloud.

Wayne shook his head. "I've been around this place longer than you." He grinned. "I learned *long ago* that we each have our place, our reason in this...contest. It's not right to wade into another person's pond. Think of me as a spectator, nothing more."

"Are you kidding me?" I said. "You're what makes this whole thing work."

"Nothing could be further from the truth, Jessica. You all see how old I am and you think of me as a wise old sage, but I assure you: the only truth in that is *old*."

"But...this has been your battle, Wayne. The Keepers were your doing. The two of us coming here—we've always thought that was you, because of the tickets you gave me. You told me to offer them to Finn. All of this. It was you."

"I'm not without a few tricks. It has been...fun, in an odd way."

"It's not over," I said.

"You just said it was," he countered. "This is where we stop. Something like that."

"I meant Mandy and me."

"The things we say often take on greater meaning as we reflect upon them." He paused and said,

“Now, I suggest you get down to the business at hand before something around here comes alive.”
He gestured to the ghosts flying overhead.

I felt a chill. I stepped forward, touched one of the plates, and closed my eyes.

Nothing.

I tried one ear, then the next.

Nothing from either bread plate.

Wayne said nothing. Amanda said nothing.

I flipped over the first of the two bread plates and concentrated.

Nothing.

The other.

Nothing.

The dinner plate.

I had to force myself to blink. Could this be real? I felt Wayne sit forward.

“Do you see that?” I asked them.

Neither spoke.

Were my eyes open or shut? Was I seeing this or dreaming it?

Words were writing themselves across the plate in a flourish of grandmotherly handwriting.

“When is the present the past?” I quoted aloud.

“Are you asking that, or what? Because FYI, there’s nothing on the bottom of the plate.”

I blinked again. My eyes must have been shut, because Mandy was right: blank.

“Is that one of yours?” I asked Wayne.

“I’m afraid not.”

“Do you know the answer?”

“I have my own idea. What do you think?”

I repeated the riddle aloud. “Tomorrow,” I said.

“Yeah! The future,” said Amanda.

Wayne simply grinned.

“Is that what you got?” I asked.

“It’s not important what I got,” he said. “I’m not the one seeing things.”

I knew what he was saying. I drew the future. I was somehow connected to it. The plate seemed to be talking directly to me. But I had no idea what it was saying.

Without knowing why, I began flipping the other dinner plates and closing my eyes. I waited a moment and then moved on. All the way down my side of the table, to the end, and down the other until I reached Wayne.

I flipped over the plate in front of him.

The same scrolled writing suddenly took shape in my mind’s eye.

Lucky 1,000

I lost my grip, juggled the plate, and dropped it. Shards of pottery exploded in a dozen different directions.

I looked at Wayne, and he looked at me. Something passed between us. I moved on to the next setting, trying to pretend where there was no pretending.

“You saw something,” he said.

“Why’d you choose that chair?” I asked. “You could have sat anywhere.”

“But I sat here. What did you see?”

“Nothing,” I answered. I’d had to lie for most of my life; little white lies to protect me and Amanda in the Barracks, bigger lies in the hope that I’d never have to go back. I considered myself pretty good at it.

Wayne laughed. I didn’t know him well, not like the Keepers did, but I’d never heard anything more than a chuckle out of him. This laugh was big and full.

“You can tell me, Jessica. It’s witchcraft. I don’t believe a word of it. I never have. That’s why I’ve survived it so long.”

He might consider the writing witchcraft, but I lived with my visions. I’d come to believe in

them, to trust them. The Haunted Mansion was said to be awaiting one more soul, one more to make its roll of ghosts number one thousand. Wayne was sitting in front of that plate. No matter how much he doubted it, I felt horrible, like I had something to do with this.

Wayne couldn't die! We needed him. The Kingdom needed him! The Keepers wouldn't make it without him.

"Nothing!" I repeated sharply. "I lost my grip and dropped it. That's all."

"So there's nothing to add to your drawing? Only a riddle about the future—which, of all us, you're most familiar with."

"Maybe it's a warning," Amanda said.

I wanted her to shut up.

"But that doesn't make sense," she said. "They're all warnings. Everything you see is a warning."

Tears burned behind my eyes. I didn't want this responsibility. I'd never asked for it.

"You will need to share what you've seen with your friends."

"I told you, I didn't see anything. I just dropped the plate. I was clumsy."

"Yes, so you said."

He didn't believe me. He stood. "I'll help you get home now. Wanda is waiting. We should hurry...before something dreadful happens."

As he said this, he began collecting the pieces of the plate.

Amanda and I helped him.

As we pieced it back together, I noticed something equally terrifying: it had broken cleanly into five perfect pieces. Five: the number of Kingdom Keepers.

I took out my drawing and studied it again. Our awful adventures during this long night had completely filled it out.

Would I dream it again now that I'd seen it? Was this it? Was it supposed to mean anything?

I looked at the plate. I could barely see any cracks. It looked whole. Complete.

But I knew differently.

WAYNE LED US OUTSIDE. Jason caught up and walked alongside me.

"So?" he asked in a whisper.

"So, we're following him somewhere," I said a little curtly.

"What happened in there?"

I looked up at him. He could read the message in my eyes: don't ask that.

But Amanda had overheard. "She saw something, but she won't talk about it, so don't bother."

"What she witnessed," Wayne said, apparently making ours an open conversation, "was dark magic. It is nothing we need pay attention to. The point is this: Jessica filled in her dream sheet, or so she claims. She found her missing dream. That is why she visited us in the first place, Jason. We must learn to not project. Projecting is Jessica's realm, not ours."

He led us up onto the balcony at the Main Street Train Station, overlooking Cinderella Castle. The park was mostly dark, but the orange glow of moonlight and distant city lights gave us a full view of the sprawling beauty below.

Wayne said, "As Imagineers, we are forced to take a stand. Either there is good *and* evil, or evil is just a lack of good."

"No difference," I said.

"Ah, but of course there is!" The old man smiled at me kindly as he spoke, but I felt like he was looking past me, into a future even I couldn't see. "One suggests evil is real, something that needs to be defeated. The other sees evil as a mere absence, a hole to be filled. We Imagineers are constantly filling such holes with joy, excitement, and wonder. What do you think the parks are about? Filling a *need*. We are like those men and women on the highways that repair potholes."

"We're the highwaymen," said Jason.

Because I was staring at Jason, I caught a flash of uncharacteristic anger from Wayne. It was a silent message to Jason, telling him, "Shut up; don't ever speak of such things." I filed away the term, hoping I'd remember it in the future.

"For now, we've won," Wayne said. "We reconnected you with your vision. What you choose

to do now is up to you, Jessica.”

It’s *not* up to me, I wanted to say. Things happen. Don’t blame me just because I see them before they do. But I held my tongue.

“Thank you,” I said instead to both Wayne and Jason. “For helping.”

“You mustn’t trouble yourself over a spot of black magic,” Wayne said. “And don’t worry about me. Of course I’m going to *change*, but not today, and not tomorrow. Not until my usefulness has run its course.”

“Don’t say that!” Mandy barked.

“You get to be my age, young lady, and you can hardly afford to be afraid. I still have Jason and the other young Imagineers to train. Some words on a plate—” Wayne met my eyes significantly, “will not stop me.” He motioned down Main Street, toward the magnificence of Cinderella Castle. “Tell me that doesn’t beat it all.”

“It does,” Amanda whispered.

Jason’s hand barely brushed mine—just barely. And somehow, my upset and tension melted away.

“It does,” I agreed.

THE END

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Ridley Pearson is the award-winning author of the Kingdom Keepers series. A recreational tree climber and sometimes snowboarder, Ridley spends whatever time he can sneaking around the Disney parks and aboard the Disney Cruise Line ships in the name of research.

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