

Burnished Doves and Sky Serpents



J.H. Sweet

Clock Winders Book Two

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book are from the Revised Standard Version.

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of the *Clock Winders Series*

Clock Winders Series

Wind Horses and Horned Lions

Burnished Doves and Sky Serpents

Netherwind and Laurelstone

The Clock of the Universe

The Once and Forever Mountain

Ode to the Peacock

By J.H. Sweet

Over favored creatures, God's blessings He showers.
To the peacock He gave great magical powers.

With talents even grander than myth and fable,
One warded off evil from manger and stable.

A pair of the birds forever guards Heaven's Gates.
Others pave streets with bricks their alchemy creates.

From the crown of another, a rainbow once flew,
By command of One with All Power to renew.

At the end of the bow, lies not a pot of gold,
But seven dragons whose coming legend foretold.

The peacock sings with angels amid Heavenly Feasts,
To celebrate the birth of these magical beasts.

With feathers like swords, the bird stands ready to fight,
Alongside those he helped clad in armor so bright.

Two dragons have completed wondrous tasks so far,
One bringing rain, the other posing as a star.

Ever reverent of our Lord's Great Presence and Might,
Five more await His future wishes and delight.

Windows to the stars, All Powerful, Ever Glowing,
The eyes of the fan, Ever Watchful, All Knowing.



*With God's light shining upon him, any dove
can be a burnished dove...*

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Chapter One

Plum Acres Ranch

Vini Aberdeen was very relaxed astride Peach Blossom, better known as Miss Peachy, the Palomino filly she had befriended the previous summer during her time at Camp Burberry Wiffle. Two other horses trotted alongside Miss Peachy, Arabian colts named Telluride and Friar Benson, who was called Benny for short. Telluride carried Charlene Orr, whom everyone called Charlie, a girl Vini once thought to be a mortal enemy but who was now, undoubtedly, her best friend. A girl named Alma McManus was riding Benny. Vini and Charlie were both working at the camp, while Alma was one of the regular summer camp-goers, but one whose situation was somewhat unique because she was staying a full four weeks at the camp while her parents traveled abroad. While Alma, age twelve, was younger than Charlie and Vini, both fifteen, the older girls found they enjoyed spending some of their free time with her, particularly because they knew she was missing her parents, this being the first time in her life she had been separated from them for more than just a few days.

On this Saturday afternoon, the girls were riding to a nearby ranch currently housing a small carnival. Plum Acres Ranch also hosted a farmers' market each weekend of summer. Having worked hard all week, Vini and Charlie were enjoying their time off, though the outing wasn't a complete separation from work for Charlie because she was planning to shop for some fresh food at the farmers' market to supplement what was available to her, as assistant cook, at the camp. Come to think of it, riding wasn't a total departure from Vini's work either because Miss Peachy was one of the horses she had been working with in hippotherapy, a program separate from the regular camp activities in which horses helped to provide different types of therapy to children with various kinds of disabilities. Though Camp Burberry Wiffle was an all-girls camp, ages eleven to sixteen, the hippotherapy program hosted both boys and girls of all ages.

Prior to this summer, the program had mainly been just two days a week; but with the services being in such demand, the camp owners, May Burberry and Alexandra Wiffle, had decided to expand, which involved not only hiring Vini for a full three weeks, followed by three additional weekends, but also the taking on of more college interns than in previous years. Excepting Sundays, the program was now scheduled daily. However, since Vini had been working pretty much full time for the past five days, May had encouraged her to take some time off and let the college interns handle everything for the afternoon. Since the camp had twenty-eighty horses, three could definitely be spared for the trip to Plum Acres Ranch, which was only about seven miles from the camp.

With Saturday mainly being a transition time between camp sessions, and somewhat chaotic, both Vini and Charlie had been looking forward to getting away from the bustle for a while. Though Alma had briefly met her three new bunkmates for the upcoming week, she too wanted to get away for a bit. Riding mainly at a trot, down shady country lanes and across a couple of open farm fields, they reached the ranch fairly quickly, watering and tethering the horses at a designated spot in a grove of trees adjacent to the parking area of the carnival. Several picnic tables occupied one corner of the grove.

Plum Acres Ranch was actually more of a farm than a ranch because its crops far outweighed its livestock. However, because cattle had once been raised on the property—which was currently home to small herds of goats and sheep, and a few miniature horses and donkeys—the owners opted for the “ranch” title out of tradition. Oddly enough, the farm no longer had a plum orchard because the current owners preferred apricots and peaches. But they had decided to keep the name, again, as tradition.

In addition to yearly crops such as corn and wheat, the property sported several long hills of blueberries, a huge field of blackberries, and two sprawling strawberry greenhouses, which made the ranch a prime destination for tourists, locals, and just about anyone else needing to satisfy a berry craving. The “Pick Your Own” feature was a popular activity for families.

Charlie was not even planning to go to the carnival, being mostly interested in the farmers’ market situated about a half-mile from the

location of the carnival, which would require a trek through various crop fields, around a short hill, and between two livestock ponds to get there. Alma, who had been hanging out with Charlie some in the kitchens in order to learn a few cooking skills, decided to join her; and they soon set off walking, following signs to the market along the edge of a corn field, and leading Benny, who was carrying several empty canvas sacks and insulated packs, which Charlie expected to fill with fresh fruits and veggies, and other market fare, the idea being that the full sacks would later be spread out amongst the three horses for the return journey to camp in order to equal the weight.

Vini didn't mind being left alone because she was expecting three friends, one being a boy a year older than she named Ben Dellinger who worked as a gardener at Doyle Mansion where Vini was employed as a housekeeper, mostly part time but occasionally full time when her schedule permitted, such as would be the case for the latter half of the summer. The other two friends, Louetta and Albert Nolan, were the grand-niece and grand-nephew of Vini's late employer, a woman named Mrs. Doyle, the former owner of the mansion now entrusted to Violet and Dave Nichols, distant cousins to Mrs. Doyle, who had inherited the property. As was their yearly custom, Louetta and Albert were visiting the mansion for part of the summer, which was how Vini had become friends with them the previous year. Louetta was only a few months older than Vini and Charlie. Albert, who would turn seventeen in the fall, already had his driver's license and had borrowed Violet's car to bring his sister and Ben, neither of which had their licenses yet, to the carnival. The group arrived barely ten minutes after Alma and Charlie departed.

Violet had packed a huge lunch for them all in a cooler, which, since everyone had either eaten a late breakfast or had a recent snack, they would all be diving into later, when Charlie and Alma returned from the market.

Vini soon discovered that Louetta was carrying something of a surprise tucked into her purse, a tiny magical creature who was none other than Pizzo, Doyle Mansion's resident puck troll. Apart from having only four fingers on each hand and four toes on each foot, characteristics common to most trolls, Pizzo looked much like a little man, with pink cheeks and light brown bushy hair, slightly tousled most

of the time. Though Pizzo was largely disagreeable, pretty much disliking anyone who wasn't Louetta, whom he absolutely adored, Vini had discovered that he wasn't such a bad little fellow to have around at times. Today, he was slightly more agreeable than other times, specifically in refraining from his common practice of spitting at people and throwing things; but this was mainly because it would have been too difficult to do so from his comfy but somewhat cramped riding spot in the purse. Puck trolls were evidently not affected by the no-daylight rule that was often applied to trolls in storybooks, so Pizzo was able to safely enjoy being out and about in the daytime on excursions such as this. Louetta's purse was one she had modified with a small cut-out on one side so that Pizzo could see well and have plenty of fresh air while inside.

While enjoying the games and rides with her friends, Vini found herself thinking of her first week at camp. She had enjoyed the busyness and hard work, which made her feel very alive and productive. The hippotherapy program was also helping her firm up plans for college and a career, because she had definitely decided she wanted to work with kids in some way in the future, if not in a program exactly like this one, then something very similar.

But in addition to thinking about down-to-earth things like her future profession, Vini's thoughts on this day were also occupied by unicorns, specifically, in wondering how many other people (if any) in the world could summon them. In recent months, she had called a unicorn three times, the first two being something of a mystery to her as to how she had done it. She had once thought that calling a unicorn was a matter of getting into a certain state of mind. However, she had come to realize that it was more of a state of being, one in which an abundance of hope, joy, and peace were allowed to permeate not only her brain, but also her very soul. Though she had done a lot of research prior to her first unicorn encounter, the main steps leading up to that event had involved trusting in God, following His lead, and getting into the correct state of being by reading specific uplifting passages marked in a bible she had found on a God-led trip to Japan.

The second time that a unicorn came to her, she had simply been recalling the bible passages. Though she hadn't remembered the quotes word for word, just thinking of them definitely made her feel very

hopeful, joyful, and peaceful, particularly in the serene setting of a mountain meadow. However, something else had ended up contributing to the appearance of the unicorn on that day—the fact that, although unknown to Vini at the time, she was in imminent mortal danger from a huge pack of demons bent on killing her, and Tulko, the wind horse God had provided for her as a helper and protector. With what seemed to be very little effort, the unicorn had swiftly disintegrated all of the demons in the meadow, including Kugari, who was specifically assigned to hunt Vini and who had killed Mrs. Doyle a short time before.

Though much about unicorns was still a mystery, the third time in particular of calling one had shored up something in the very core of her being that she knew would definitely allow her consistent access to the creatures from that point on. The third appearance had been in response to Vini's silent call for help upon recognizing nearby danger in the form of a demon named Ureg, the commander of the late Kugari. While remaining as calm as possible, and trusting absolutely in God, Vini had simply expected a unicorn to materialize and save her, while having complete confidence that it would. Both trust and confidence had been the key factors in making the expectation into a reality. Being some distance away and fleeing quickly had saved Ureg from death, but only by a mere half-second.

As with the other two appearances, the unicorn hadn't stayed long, a mere twenty seconds; but Vini was nonetheless thrilled, especially because this was the same unicorn that had saved her in the meadow, one with eyes very similar to those of her late employer, the first one having had eyes very like those of her late grandfather. Once again seeing the warm brown eyes of Mrs. Doyle reinforced Vini's belief that a certain aspect of her unicorn research was true—the concept of the creatures acting as a sort of conduit by which departed souls could occasionally visit earth and connect with certain people.

Though brief so far, her contact with unicorns had solidified her belief that certain other characteristics discovered in her research were true as well, mainly that unicorns were pure creatures capable of battling great evil and bringing goodness into the world. This made sense because the qualities of hope, joy, and peace would not only likely be attractive to unicorns, but were also thought to make up the

mysterious heavenly element known as quintessence, which many experts agreed was somehow related to unicorns.

Although Vini was confident in her ability to call unicorns, she was trying to be careful about doing so because the creatures were still so mysterious, particularly with regard to their powers and purposes.

Having always had the gift of discernment, which gave her the ability to recognize the truth in various situations, including in her research information, she knew not to call unicorns frivolously. These were definitely not creatures of storybooks, to be ridden around on by princes and princesses. One aspect of particular concern in calling unicorns was having enough sustenance for them. Though magical creatures could choose to eat other foods, the ones on the side of good fed primarily on the goodness of humankind, while those on the side of evil fed mainly on the wickedness in human beings. With maliciousness being so prevalent in the world of today, it seemed there was plenty for creatures like demons and hobgoblins to feed on. But since qualities such as kindness and generosity were often in short supply, if the unicorns she called weren't already part of our world, she was definitely worried that they wouldn't have enough to eat.

The carnival generally closed at three each day. With most people coming early to beat the summer heat, few patrons were left by the afternoon. With no crowds or lines, the four friends were pretty much able to play as many games and ride as many rides as they wanted to in less than two hours.

Heading back to the area where the horses were tethered, in passing the carousel, Ben and Vini decided to take the last ride before closing, while Albert and Louetta went on to the picnic area to begin setting up for their late lunch. As Vini chose the carousel giraffe, with a family of five occupying all of the horses, Ben decided to ride the ostrich.

After disembarking, when the family was out of earshot, Ben said peevishly, but in a joking and good-natured sort of way, "I never get to ride horses, not even fake ones."

By the time Vini and Ben arrived at the picnic area, which was completely deserted except for their own party, Louetta and Albert had pretty much finished laying out lunch, under Pizzo's watchful and eager eyes, since he was one of those magical creatures who chose, wholeheartedly, to eat people food, even though he didn't need to.

However, since Charlie and Alma had not yet come back from the farmers' market, they decided to wait lunch for them, at which point, Vini offered to accompany Ben for a short horseback ride. As it turns out, he had ridden before, a couple of times at a church summer camp, and was able to handle Telluride fairly well, though Vini and Miss Peachy stayed close to make sure all went smoothly. In order to keep an eye out for the return of Alma and Charlie, the pair mainly trotted in circles around the edges of the picnic area.

Watching the trotting horses, Pizzo was getting a little cranky because he was ready for the picnic goodies. Though Louetta had bought him a bag of candied peanuts and cashews, having discovered that he had already eaten over half of the nuts, she had confiscated the remainder of the bag, telling the little troll that he needed to save room for lunch. With the peanuts and cashews not currently available, Pizzo was more than ready for the sandwiches, grapes, strawberries, and a variety of sweet treats that had all been unpacked from the cooler. In order to keep Pizzo hidden from Alma (because magical things were generally kept secret from most people), Louetta was planning to take him to the car with his plateful of food so that he could enjoy a private picnic. Though she still thought it polite to wait for everyone, in order to appease her little friend, Louetta gave Pizzo half of a lemon cookie bar, which he greedily devoured, almost also devouring the napkin on which the treat had been placed in his haste.

Wondering what could be keeping Alma and Charlie, Ben and Vini had just about decided to ride toward the farmers' market in search of them when Miss Peachy and Telluride both suddenly reared, snorting and whinnying loudly. Taken completely by surprise, the two riders clung desperately to their saddles, also grappling for clumps of the horses' manes in an effort to stay seated.

Vini's first thought was that a snake or some other wild creature had startled the horses. This was not the case; and the truth would, sadly and scarily, turn out to be much worse, as Ben and Vini would soon discover.

Immediately following the sudden rear, as the front hooves of Miss Peachy and Telluride again met the ground, the horses bolted, streaking across the picnic area, through a narrow soybean field, and into a peach

orchard, in a wild frenzy, as though rockets had somehow been installed on their rear legs.

Though a snake would have been a possibility, what was actually affecting the horses was not anything earthly in a normal sense; but rather, two demons named Hul and Skugga, occupying and roaming the earth, and who, at present, were also occupying the two horses. Being shapeshifting, and not made of much material substance, just mainly evil energy mixed with a few bits of other foul ingredients, most demons were easily able to master the ability to enter and possess other creatures.

Under the command of their Master, none other than Satan himself, Hul and Skugga had been after Ben and his twin brother since the boys were babies, the reason for this being that the twins were destined to do extraordinary things on the side of good during their lifetimes, things that would divert souls away from Satan's grasp. Of course, demons seldom killed in an outright manner because they needed to work in secret. If exposed, people who didn't believe in God and Satan would be forced to acknowledge the truth, and might end up choosing God's golden path, instead of the road to hell. Most often, demons chose to bring about the deaths of their targets in roundabout ways, such as by arranging accidents, or by careful planning so that the deaths would appear to be either suicides or murders that could be pinned on innocent human beings. Now, having tracked down one of the objects of their assignment, the demons saw their chance not only to dispatch one of the twins, but also another prime target—the girl known as Vini Aberdeen.

Their Master's hatred toward this particular one of God's children was well known in the demon community. Satan was horribly angry because it seemed the very same girl that had learned to summon unicorns was now on a quest to find dragons; and she might actually be successful, given her track record, and tenacity, and the current size of her roar. (Satan hated to admit it, but the last part of Proverbs 28:1 was spot on, with regard to many devoted believers. "...the righteous are bold as a lion.") When Kugari met his untimely end, Satan had decided not to assign a new demon to target Vini; instead, he had chosen a much better creature for the assignment. Having underestimated the girl the first time (along with overestimating the skills of Kugari), he wouldn't be making the same mistake again. This time, more careful plans would

be made. However, recognizing that his demons still might be useful in bringing about her end, none were forbidden to act if a clear opportunity presented itself. Such had been the case recently with Ureg. Unfortunately, the disgusting girl had recognized the threat and had called a unicorn, a creature terrifying to demons, in specific, because of their light. Though the light aspect was largely a mystery to most human beings, demons were well aware that unicorns carry a powerful radiance created especially for them by God. While demons could stand normal daylight, though they didn't particularly like it, even a slight amount of light emitted by a unicorn would be fatal to them.

Before occupying the horses, Hul and Skugga had been looking on from various vantage points among the densely-growing trees just outside the picnic area. While skulking through the shadows, and looking much like stringy shadows themselves, the pair had entered Miss Peachy and Telluride swiftly and simultaneously (through ears, noses, and mouths), at a point when the horses passed very close to them.

Running wildly, in a crazy zigzagging pattern around the orchard, the demon-possessed horses began crashing their riders' arms and legs into tree limbs. Having directed the horses into the orchard for this exact purpose, which they hoped would shortly unseat Vini and Ben, the demons were basically licking their chops in anticipation of the relatively easy kills.

In having witnessed the abrupt departure of the horses, Albert and Louetta had run after them, to the edge of the orchard, where they viewed the scary scene with extreme worry for the safety of their friends.

Clinging precariously to the saddle, Vini tried to stay calm (a difficult thing to do) as she silently called for Tulko. Since wind horses were able to communicate by thought, Vini often called to her friend in this way, though not often while in this much distress. Unfortunately, he was too far away to hear her cry for help. Having felt nothing more than what seemed to be a short gust of warm air just before the horses reared, Vini couldn't imagine what was happening; until, that is, Hul, inhabiting Miss Peachy, began planting thoughts into her brain to tell her exactly what was going on. Likewise, inside Telluride, Skugga used his telepathic powers to inform Ben of his evil presence. Most demons

mastered the skill of planting thoughts early on in their careers, so it was no wonder that Hul and Skugga, each nearly a hundred years old, were experts at this. In addition to helping to tempt and turn human beings to evil, planting thoughts was a tactic demons often liked to use to influence and even sometimes terrify their victims, in the hopes of panicking them into doing something foolish, such as jumping from the horses, which, if the fall didn't kill them, would leave them unprotected and out in the open.

Vini was not even carrying her dagger, with which she had fought demons before. Not only were weapons not allowed at camp, there was no good place to secret such an item so that it would be handy for emergencies. Ben too was not armed in any way. And not only was Tulko not around, Jelzey and Beme, the sister and brother firebird team assigned to protect the twins, were also not available because, on this particular afternoon, under God's direction, they were off helping to keep a volcano from erupting.

However, though their assigned protectors were not around, Vini and Ben were about to discover that divine help would be provided because Louetta had managed to scoop up Pizzo before running after the horses. Based on his size, one might think the little troll would be too small to help. But, of course, it's never wise to underestimate the power of goodness, even in small and somewhat disagreeable packages such as puck trolls.

The carousel ride happened to be directly on the edge of the soybean field, basically only about thirty yards from the peach orchard. Whistling and waving from Louetta's palms to catch her attention, Pizzo signaled to his friend to move nearer the carousel.

Running in haste through knee-high soybean plants, Louetta quickly reached the ride, where she stooped to deposit Pizzo on the platform of the carousel. From this position, she could still see the horses, with Vini and Ben miraculously still atop them, racing wildly on a crisscrossing path through the peach orchard.

Taking a deep breath, as Louetta moved back to get out of the way, Pizzo got busy very quickly, pointing and gesturing to particular carousel animals, while making grotesque faces and grunting, all of which would rather quickly have its intended effect. Using a rather amazing skill specific to puck trolls, namely, the ability to awaken

magic deep within artistic creations, Pizo soon brought over half of the carousel animals to life, in a cloud of colorful light swirls, which might have been likened to slow-moving fireworks that, instead of shooting upwards, traced twirling scrolls over the area surrounding the carousel, as though two dozen rhythmic gymnasts were performing fabulous ribbon routines with ribbons made of pure light, in all the colors of the rainbow, plus a few extra shades mixed in.

Pizo was being rather specific in his efforts because he could tell which creatures would probably be most effective while being less likely to draw too much attention while out and about. Enchanting the ostrich, zebra, cheetah, and giant swan, he chose to leave the hippo, giraffe, and brown bear in their places. Working very fast, so much so that his face turned very purple, which caused Louetta watching nearby to worry for him, the little troll also brought all five carousel horses to life.

Next, throwing squeaky commands that sounded much like a series of musical chirps and whistles, Pizo ordered the enchanted animals to run after the possessed horses.

Though the carousel horses were smaller than regular horses, they were very fast, with the ostrich and cheetah being even faster. Who would have thought an ostrich could run so fast, as fast as the camp horses, it seemed. The swan was very speedy too, in flying low over the orchard to head off Miss Peachy and Telluride. The zebra, bringing up the rear, managed to block an attempt at backtracking by the possessed horses, who were fairly quickly herded into a small and currently-unused corral by the cheetah and two of the carousel horses. With the other three enchanted horses, followed by the ostrich and zebra, arriving at the enclosure in short order, and the swan circling from above, the possessed pair was well cornered. Though part of the corral fencing was broken down, there was enough still in place to keep them contained. The ostrich, with his speed and feathery wide wings, was particularly good at blocking any attempts of the horses to escape. Landing, the swan too, being so large, particularly with wings spread, was not only able to keep the two horses in place, but was also able to help the ostrich and cheetah back Miss Peachy and Telluride up to a strong section of corral fencing, upon which Vini and Ben dismounted and climbed over in order to put distance between themselves and the

possessed horses, who didn't remain possessed for long because Hul and Skugga, realizing they were as cornered and vulnerable as the creatures they were occupying, shortly began streaming out of the mouths, noses, and ears of the horses.

Although the stringy shadows quickly assembled themselves into two full-blown, putrid-colored, and eight-feet-tall-each monsters with gnarled muscles, sharply-clawed feet and hands, powerful wings, and fiercely-fanged countenances—a form most demons preferred when fighting foes—Hul and Skugga chose to flee, instead of fight. But this was not due to recognizing that they were outnumbered; nor was it because the demons were slightly disoriented from all of the bouncing around they had experienced while inside the horses. Instead, their flight was due to the appearance of a unicorn, fortunately for them on the opposite side of a lean-to structure occupying one corner of the corral, which blocked the golden shimmer of the creature, thus saving the demons from death. Taking flight quickly, slightly too quickly for the swan to follow and knock them out of the sky, Hul and Skugga would remain safe, for the time being. And if the demons had been capable of counting their blessings, which of course they were not, they would have done so, having only escaped death-by-unicorn-light by less than two seconds as the magnificent creature swiftly stepped from behind the lean-to and out into the open, in a direct line of sight to where the demons had briefly stood.

Vini, barely conscious that she had called the unicorn, was remarkably calm, a fact that surprised Ben, whose legs were shaking, nearly as much from seeing the beautiful golden creature as from the shock and fear of the wild and scary ride. Recognizing the eyes of the unicorn immediately, as again being very like those of Mrs. Doyle, Vini smiled and breathed deeply in complete contentment.

Even after the unicorn disappeared, in an instant, about six seconds later, Hul and Skugga, who had landed nearby and hidden themselves in an empty trailer generally used to transport the carnival's small roller coaster when disassembled, didn't come back. This was partly because they had discovered that the longer they were inside Telluride and Miss Peachy, the less control they had over the horses, who were extremely smart and strong-willed creatures, not prone to accepting this type of control either easily or long term. Another reason the demons decided

to stay hidden, then flee for good a short while later, was due to the appearance of Valo, the wind horse attached to Camp Burberry Wiffle and specifically to May Burberry. Lyydu, the thunderbird assigned by God to be Charlie's helper and protector, was with Valo. Landing very near the corral, the magical pair startled the enchanted ostrich to the point that the poor bird buried its head in an old pile of hay. (Though the phenomenon of ostriches hiding their heads when frightened was largely a myth, evidently, the carousel ostrich didn't know this.)

Valo and Lyydu didn't stay long. Having responded to the distress they had sensed a short while earlier from Miss Peachy and Telluride—as the horses struggled to rid themselves of their nasty and unwanted occupants—upon discovering that the situation was under control, the protectors swiftly departed to be off on more important business. While the demons, with their somewhat small brains that were definitely inferior to those of humans, might have been stupid enough to take on both a wind horse and a thunderbird at the same time, Hul and Skugga also feared an encounter they knew they could not survive—that of the return of the unicorn. How maddening it was for them to have to leave with such little to show for their tiring efforts.

Led by Albert and Louetta (who had Pizzo perched on her shoulder), the enchanted carousel animals were escorted back to their ride. Vini and Ben, leading Miss Peachy and Telluride by their reins, brought up the rear, following a trail of glittering hoof prints, ostrich footprints, and cheetah paw prints that began to fade rather quickly as the group passed. Upon reaching the carousel, Pizzo—using a short series of grunts, several chirps, and a string of rather animated and somewhat amusing gestures—managed to get the animals settled back into their proper places within just a few minutes, which, thankfully, was before any of the carnival workers had a chance to notice anything out of the ordinary.

After reaching the picnic area, knowing how important it was to cool down horses that were hot from exertion, Vini and Ben allowed Miss Peachy and Telluride to take a good long drink from the water trough in the tethering area, after which, they poured large cups of water over the horses' backs to further cool them. Upon wiping off excess water using towels kept in the trunk of the car, Vini and Ben then

slowly walked the horses in circles around the shady picnic area for about ten minutes to complete the cooling process.

Since Alma and Charlie were sure to be back at any moment, Louetta got Pizzo settled with an enormous plate of food into the back seat of the car, which was parked in full shade with the windows rolled down so he could stay fairly cool. Situated so, the little troll was perfectly happy. As something of an enigma to his small size, it was rather amazing how much food he could put away, especially since he didn't actually need this type of sustenance. But the food probably did give him extra energy, to help with all of the running around he tended to do. But even in knowing how much food her little friend could eat, Louetta was still surprised later to find the plate completely empty on the seat next to the napping troll; and she basically couldn't imagine where he had managed to put it all in his roughly six-inch frame.

Just as Louetta was returning to the picnic table after getting Pizzo settled, Alma and Charlie arrived back from the market. The reason for their delay was obvious because Benny was loaded up with sacks full of fruits and vegetables. Various cheeses and sausages filled the insulated packs. With the heat, they had walked somewhat slowly on the way back, which had also delayed their return. When Benny was unloaded, he took a long drink of water before joining Miss Peachy and Telluride in a grassy area to graze.

"We didn't expect you to wait for us to eat," Charlie said apologetically. "We thought we'd just eat later. There were so many neat people to talk to at the market; it was really hard to break away."

Alma was nodding as she said, "Cheese makers, basket makers, bread and jam makers, pickle people, organic farmers, and lots of others."

"We met a lady that makes amazing pickles, and a chicken farmer, and a man who makes wonderful goat cheese," Charlie agreed. "I'm going to tell my dad that we need to come back later in the summer." Charlie lived just with her father, her mother having passed away when Charlie was a baby. With Mr. Orr having a great love for cooking, which Charlie had definitely inherited, the father-daughter team did a lot of things like farmers' markets and berrying together, in addition to experimenting a lot in the kitchen, especially since Charlie was planning

to go to culinary school and make food pretty much her complete career in the future.

Ben was introduced to Alma as his identical twin brother, Sam, because his individual identity was still mostly a secret, related to the exact nightmarish event that had so rudely interrupted their lovely, serene, and fun-filled afternoon. In order to stay hidden from the demons pursuing them, Ben and Sam had pretended to be one person since their toddler years. Their parents having passed away when they were babies, the boys had secretly come to live with a man named John Dellinger who had been one of their mother's close childhood friends and who was most often called their uncle. Now that Hul and Skugga had located the twins, and had made this fact known to the boys and their uncle through planted thoughts, secrecy was pretty much pointless. So Mr. Dellinger was working on a plan to reveal the second twin, probably late summer or early fall.

So far, in discussing a possible plan, they felt a simple explanation would be the most believable, probably something along the lines that, based on early custody arrangements, Ben had been living with a relative in another state after their parents' deaths, likely an elderly grandparent, and was just now being introduced to his brother, who had ended up coming to live with his uncle because Ben's custodian wouldn't have been able to care for both children at once.

Being mussed and a bit scratched up from their wild run through the peach orchard, Vini and Ben explained to Alma and Charlie that they had run into a couple of low-hanging tree branches while Vini was teaching "Sam" to ride.

"Yes, it's obvious I need more lessons," Ben said.

Vini still appeared cool as a cucumber after the demon encounter, and the relaxing lunch helped Ben to calm down further from the experience. If Alma noticed anything odd, she didn't say anything.

Charlie could tell that something had happened while she was gone, but figured out that Vini didn't want to say in front of Alma. What a story Vini would have to share with her at night in their cabin. Though the friends were housed in a four-bed bunkhouse, no one else was bunking with them this week. Most of the college students commuted, which meant very few ended up staying nights at the camp. One of the

swim instructors had been bunking with them, but would be gone for the next two weeks.

While chatting, the group thoroughly enjoyed Violet's delicious picnic spread, which was mostly the result of her husband's mastery in the kitchen. Though probably not as talented as Charlie, Dave was a very good cook.

At a time when Alma and Charlie were taking cut-up apples to the horses, Ben briefly talked about Sam, who was evidently keeping busy with yardwork at the mansion and at church, along with lifeguarding at a community pool. "He's kind of keeping to himself a lot lately," Ben said.

He always did, Vini thought, in knowing that Sam wasn't nearly as outgoing as his brother. Plus, after Mrs. Doyle's death in the spring, he had seemed even more subdued and introspective than normal, which was understandable, as everyone in their circle had been greatly affected by the tragedy.

"Is there anything that might protect the horses in the future," Ben worriedly asked, "as far as keeping demons from possessing them again?" He was truly concerned for the safety of Vini and Charlie, who were on horseback a lot at the camp.

"With Tulko, Valo, and Lydu around so much," Albert offered, "I wouldn't think the demons would come very near the camp. Plus, horse sense is not just a myth. Most horses are super smart, and super intuitive. With what's just happened, the horses will probably be on their guard against it from now on. So I doubt it will happen again."

He was of course right. Miss Peachy and Telluride would be constantly on their guard after this, and would also warn the other camp horses.

Alma and Charlie arrived back from giving the treats to the horses just as Louetta was unpacking a large chocolate crême pie from the cooler, which she had already dug into in order to give Pizzo a piece. While they were enjoying the dessert, Albert offered to make a stop at Camp Burberry Wiffle on their way home to drop off the sacks of food from the farmers' market so that the horses wouldn't have to bear the extra burden for the ride back. "We might as well make use of the car," he said. "It's only a short detour to make a stop at the camp kitchens."

Since this was such a good idea, Albert and Ben had the sacks loaded into the trunk of the car in short order, while the others cleaned up the picnic area and packed leftovers into the cooler.

Vini, Charlie, and Alma said their goodbyes and set off on the horses a few minutes later.

While she had appeared outwardly calm, Vini was definitely unnerved by the events of the afternoon, naturally, since it would be extremely unlikely for anyone to ever get so used to having run-ins with demons that each new experience wouldn't at least shake them up to a certain degree. In currently being alone with her thoughts, because Charlie and Alma were riding a little ahead of her, Vini remembered to say a prayer of thanks to God for His help, guidance, and protection. In making creatures such as wind horses, thunderbirds, unicorns, and even puck trolls available, God was certainly providing protection for Vini and her friends; and she often chided herself for forgetting to thank and praise Him more often.

The leisurely ride back to camp was relaxing; and in trying to further calm down from the scare, Vini's mind began pondering her next task—that of finding dragons. A couple of her recent dreams, which she felt sure were messages from God, were definitely leading her in that direction, not to mention coming across a lot of information about dragons from various other sources lately. However, just as she had with unicorns, she was going to need to rely heavily on her ability to discern, in order to work her way through the massive and somewhat muddled information.

One of the first things that had occurred to her upon embarking on this new quest was that unicorns might be important in relation to dragons, particularly because she felt there must have been some reason why she had been led to find them first.

Vini had inherited over fifty journals from her late employer, mostly filled with Mrs. Doyle's lifetime of research notes pertaining to magical creatures. While Vini had only been reading them for a few short weeks, she had already come across a lot of information on both unicorns and dragons, some of which was intertwined. One of Mrs. Doyle's notes in particular had really spoken to her, mainly because the words seemed to ring so true.

“If the horn of the unicorn winds the Clock of the Universe, are sky serpents, also known as dragons, responsible for the maintenance of the clock? Are they keeping it in repair? Or are they doing something else? They might be preparing for something. I am almost certain that dragons are responsible for something more than just keeping hellfire in check, a commonly-held belief relating to dragons. The ability to heal is another skill attributed to dragons. But I don’t think the healing is a straightforward kind, like helping someone recover from illness or from being wounded. I think it is more a type of healing pertaining to fixing problems in the universe, perhaps something like the way unicorns can bring goodness into the world to counter evil.”

Even before coming across this note, Vini herself had several times pondered the universe as being something like an enormous clock, with each creature in it, even humans, being a part of its workings, or at least playing a part in keeping the clock running smoothly by performing certain tasks. With regard to the mention of the horn of the unicorn, this was certainly one of the most mysterious aspects of the creatures, as far as what purpose the horn might serve; or, if it didn’t particularly have a purpose, what it might represent. In fact, very little was written about the horn in any of the books Vini had read. But instead of dismissing Mrs. Doyle’s note about winding the clock as a metaphor, Vini took it seriously, as though it were completely possible. In her quest for unicorns, she had discovered that even some of the strangest ideas could be true; and it was important to keep an open mind. After all, God’s ways were mysterious.

Vini had once imagined that Tulko, with his amazing speed, might be the key to finding unicorns, in that he might help her catch up to the creatures, thought to be capable of traveling faster than the speed of light. While the wind horse had helped her travel to places like Italy and Japan in mere minutes, his speed had not been a factor in finding unicorns, which had come to her entirely from God. Vini hadn’t seen much of Tulko so far this summer because he was off doing important work, such as helping Lyydu to break up storms, or occasionally stir them up, under God’s direction.

During the uneventful and tranquil ride back to camp, while enjoying the beauties of nature and the cooling of the day from

northerly breezes and the stretch of late-afternoon shadows, Vini was fairly well able to recover from the demon ordeal, especially in reminding herself that God was always with her, and that He was equipping her to deal with demons and whatever else Satan might throw at her. After all, she was one of His children, so of course He was going to protect her and give her all the tools needed to achieve victory over the evils of the world. As they were just heading into the camp stables, Vini gave thanks again to God not only for saving her from the demons, but for His many other blessings as well. Unsaddling the horses, she was all smiles in continuing to think about wonders such as unicorns and dragons.

Piszo was also smiling on the ride back to the mansion. Though Louetta was still saving his half bag of candied peanuts and cashews to give to him after they got home, she had managed to track down one of the carnival food vendors before they left, as a surprise for the little troll, who was now enjoying a huge ball of blue cotton candy, about half of which he managed to consume before they even made the stop at the camp kitchens.

Although the puck troll had traveled about the fair in Louetta's purse, she had insisted that he ride more securely while in the car. Therefore, sitting next to her in the backseat, he was buckled into his own tiny seatbelt, which Louetta had fashioned out of shoelaces and a small shiny silver buckle from an old pair of shoes before attaching the apparatus to the stationary part of the middle seatbelt. With blue lips and a shining face, Piszo was as happy as could be on the trip home.

Chapter Two

Dreams and Reflections

Looking in the wall mirror as she brushed her hair shortly before bedtime, while Charlie was off to the bathroom to take a shower, Vini noticed the soft golden glow from a lamp behind her reflected in the mirror; and this started her thinking of the light of unicorns. When first researching the creatures, and even in pondering their mysteries after the first couple of contacts with them, Vini hadn't much thought about their light being all that significant. Her research definitely indicated unicorns were connected to water, and possibly to human souls; but very little was mentioned about their light, as far as how powerful it might be, or what purpose it might serve, other than the obvious purpose of disintegrating demons. Quite a few books she had read indicated that one way in which unicorns bring goodness into the world is by helping others see the good in bad situations; in other words, throwing a proverbial better light on troubling circumstances.

This was indeed true, and an accurate description of what had happened after the unicorn left the corral. Though brief, as most unicorn visits are, the twenty-seven seconds the creature spent zipping around Plum Acres Ranch and a small nearby town ended up bringing goodness into the world in several ways. For one thing, the carnival owner, who was losing one of his clowns—a popular juggler and balloon artist named Al—to a competitor's carnival, stopped grumbling about the loss when he suddenly had a thought planted into his brain that it would be a very good thing for Colossal Al Calico to leave his employment because if he stayed, Al would end up being seriously hurt while helping to dismantle one of the rides at a fairgrounds in the upcoming fall. Another benefit of the unicorn visit involved a woman driving home from the farmers' market to her house in the nearby town. Having just missed out on adopting a child, a four-year-old girl who ended up going to another family, the woman was incredibly despondent, to the point that she was actually sobbing while driving.

However, what the unicorn allowed her to see was that the child would eventually save the life of another sibling in the family that had adopted her. The woman then saw a vision of the child she would be adopting in two years' time, a boy age six, who would end up being a perfect fit for her family. Arriving home happy and full of hope, the woman remembered to pray, giving thanks to God for these revelations, and for the many other blessings He brought to her life. Two additional people received similar insightful information from the unicorn, which definitely served to throw a better light onto their troubling circumstances, thus bringing them feelings of extreme relief and contentment.

Of course, Vini couldn't know about these things; but she did feel certain that the unicorn's visit had brought more good into the world than just in saving her and her friends.

Though it was only nine o'clock when Charlie returned from showering, the girls went to bed straight away. With Vini having already filled Charlie in on the details of what she had missed during her time at the market, the girls didn't stay up late to chat. In truth, they seldom stayed up late at camp because Charlie needed to get up each morning at five o'clock to get started on making breakfast. Vini too was up around that time each day, either reading or going to the morning devotional at the camp chapel before breakfasting and starting work at seven-thirty.

The moon was very bright as Vini tried to relax enough to fall asleep. Though she wasn't necessarily still unsettled from the events of the day, her mind was all awlirl, as it often was when exciting things were happening in her life. With so much going on at once, it was often hard to quiet her mind. Trying to stay still so that her tossing and turning wouldn't wake Charlie across the room, Vini gazed at the moonlight streaming into the bunkhouse through the slatted blinds covering the windows. The slanting patterns of light on the floor made her again think of the light of unicorns, and she began wondering if the creatures might bring goodness into the world in ways she hadn't previously imagined.

Several of Mrs. Doyle's journal notes had mentioned that the light of unicorns didn't only combat evil, but could act as a guiding light. One entry had stressed that the light held by unicorns might be the most

important thing because we can't find anything important without light. The word "find" in the entry had been underlined, twice. Since Vini didn't have either the journal or her own notes handy to refer to, her mind struggled to remember the rest of the entry, about how unicorns might act as a beacon, or something like a flashlight to illuminate important things.

Could this possibly relate to my quest for dragons? Could the light of a unicorn somehow help me find a dragon?

In pondering light guiding or illuminating, Vini thought, *Before finding the first unicorn, I saw a light at the end of the tunnel in Japan that might have been a unicorn; but I didn't recognize it for what it was at the time.*

Thinking of light, in general, the first thing that came to mind was the light of Jesus Christ. Smiling, Vini recalled a somewhat poetic note by Mrs. Doyle. "Light is responsible for making wonderful things possible—plants grow and flowers bloom. A rainbow is not possible without light, and we can only see shooting stars to make wishes upon because of their light."

And what if the light of unicorns was somehow connected to the light inside people, the light they carry because of Jesus. *Believers are definitely filled with light, as the bible tells us*, Vini thought, recalling quotes from Matthew 5:14 and 5:16. "You are the light of the world. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." She had also memorized Ephesians 5:8-9. "... for once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true)...."

In addition to her powers of discernment, Vini knew these things to be true because she could often feel the light, inside her, in a very powerful way. However, she also knew this was a power some people never acknowledged, and others never figured out how to tap within their lifetimes. And what a waste, not to use the power God has filled us with. Admittedly, certain strengths and abilities might be limited by God because He can't trust us with the power. Human beings, by nature, are very self-centered, oftentimes using all of their resources for self, without contributing much to the lives of others. Since many people given an abundance of blessings—such as health, property,

intelligence, creativity, wealth, and energy—tend to use these things mainly for self, instead of giving them away as God intends, He might very well limit or suppress the use of them. Even in her relatively short life so far, Vini had learned enough to know that people are supposed to do more giving than receiving, because this was what could truly make the world a better place.

Realizing her thoughts had meandered, Vini scolded herself. *This probably isn't on target with either unicorns or dragons. Or...is it?* she pondered. *Light equals goodness. So it might not be too much of a stretch to connect the light of unicorns with the light inside each of God's children, and, by extension, the power of unicorns with the potential power inside human beings.*

Vini's mind tried to talk itself out of this theory pretty quickly; but still, she wondered. Sighing, and thinking of how mysterious unicorns still were to her, she desperately wished she knew more of their secrets. But in needing to be cautious and wait for God's lead, she didn't feel she could just summon a unicorn to sit down and have a conversation with, and demand, "Tell me all your secrets." Not only did she think it unlikely the creature would comply, this simply wasn't the way things from God worked, at least, not in her experience. She had to trust, surrender control, and give God time to do His work, all the while being carefully tuned-in to His guidance.

She hadn't always been as observant as she should have been. In fact, on occasion, God had pretty much had to hit her over the head to get her to recognize certain things, like the messages telling her to go to Italy and Japan to find clues leading to the unicorn. Vini also knew that Mrs. Doyle had given her clues and nudges many times that she hadn't picked up on until later, like the ones leading to the discovery of a huge second library secreted in the subbasement of the mansion. The Sam-Ben thing was another good example of Vini's lack in skills of observation. She had been the last of their close acquaintances to notice that they were two people; and she might never have figured it out except that they told her, once pretty much everyone else knew. Of course, they had always taken turns working at the mansion, and were never seen together. But still, it was hard for her to believe she hadn't noticed the slight differences in their appearances that she now thought were pretty obvious.

In thinking of the twins, Vini recalled that light had also saved her once in Mrs. Doyle's garden. She had been with Albert, Louetta, and what had turned out to be Ben (though at the time she thought he was Sam) when they became trapped in a Demon Pocket, which was some sort of mysterious place or phenomenon used by demons to lure, trap, and kill human beings. But at that time, the light that saved them wasn't from a unicorn, but from one of the firebirds, Jelzey. This was still more evidence that light was definitely a powerful agent of good because it was what had basically pulled them out of the Demon Pocket, acting as a beacon.

With clouds dimming the moonlight surrounding the bunkhouse, and the darkness helping her to relax, in her drowsiness, Vini's mind formed a picture of Jelzey in the garden. But instead of being ablaze, having used her shapeshifting ability to shrink down to about the size of a lightning bug, the firebird was giving off more of a soft glow while keeping to the shadows of the garden. Vini's mind firmly in this serene setting, instead of counting sheep to fall asleep, she slowly counted a row of red tulips in the flower bed. Reaching twenty-seven, she did finally manage to drift off.

After enjoying the camp church service the next morning, on the stroll to the dining hall, her stomach rumbling for breakfast, Vini pondered a strange dream she had had the previous night in which a peacock feather and a sand dollar were both basically planted in the flower bed she had been picturing while counting tulips to fall asleep. Although they were of completely different shapes, sizes, and colors, standing next to one another in the soft earth, the feather and dollar looked as though they belonged together. The pair also looked right at home amongst the lovely array of flowers. However, the scene didn't stay completely pleasant and serene because a copperhead snake was also in the tulip bed, hidden, though Vini somehow knew it was there. Very suddenly, before she even had time to worry about the danger of the snake, a peacock that had been perched in a nearby tree came screaming in (the call of the bird sounding very much like the scream of a person). Landing in the flower bed, the bird first stomped the snake repeatedly, then tore it to shreds with its beak before swallowing all of the pieces of the snake. Remarkably, for all of the stomping and shredding, not one flower in the bed was damaged; and neither were the

feather and sand dollar at all disturbed. After the meal of snake, the bird simply took to flight, in a nearly straight-up path (almost like a rocket taking off) that fairly took Vini's breath away from the beauty and grace of it, with wings spectacularly splayed and colorful tail feathers gleaming in the evening sunlight gently filtering through nearby tree limbs.

Though she was often able to interpret her dreams, as far as how they might apply to something going on in her life, she couldn't make anything of this one. Having never read anything about peacocks in her research, she couldn't imagine how they might connect with either unicorns or dragons. Sand dollars were definitely related to unicorns, but she had never read anything that associated them with peacocks. The snake might represent Satan or any of his followers; but, then, many other dangerous and scary things of the world could too.

With hippotherapy not scheduled on Sundays, after a morning of helping to care for the horses, and a short swim after lunch, Vini read for the rest of the day, including a couple of hours after dinner. Having brought fifteen books with her from the mansion's libraries, she had no shortage of reading materials, which she kept locked in a sturdy trunk in the bunkhouse, not only because these were borrowed and valuable books that needed to be kept safe, but also because the theft in the spring of a special bible and her spiral binder full of notes made her wary of leaving important things unlocked and out in the open.

Since the books she had borrowed were mainly about magical creatures, and four of them specifically on the subject of dragons, Vini never expected to find anything about peacocks in them. However, one beautiful illustration showed a peacock standing on a rock ledge overlooking a dragon seated on the ground below the ledge, the bird being practically at eye level with the enormous creature. She had seen this picture before but hadn't particularly noticed the peacock, and she might not have noticed today except for the dream. However, nothing was mentioned about peacocks in the text of the book, at least, not that she could find in the hour or so of reading the chapters just before and just after the illustration, the title of which was *Dragon in Waiting*, whatever that meant.

Despite not finding anything about peacocks, she did come across something in one of the chapters that captured her attention—a mention

of watchmen, appointed by God to watch over certain of His children. This was something Mrs. Doyle had noted a couple of times in her journals and which Vini had found brief references to in various books. However, no one seemed to know who or what the watchmen were. Her bible beside her on the bed, she randomly opened it and was elated to find her eyes drawn to the first part of Isaiah 62:6, which was God speaking to her through His Word, as He often did. “Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, I have set watchmen; all the day and all the night they shall never be silent.”

So the concept of watchmen is true, she thought.

From the snippets she had found while reading, she felt the watchmen were likely something very different than other protectors like Tulko and Lyydu. And from what she had so far been able to learn about unicorns, they were probably not the watchmen either. So this was another mystery. After a few moments of thinking, she wrote a note in her journal. “Who are the watchmen?”

With so much to ponder over, Vini felt that sometimes that’s all her brain did—puzzle over mysteries.

Meanwhile, in the camp kitchens, scrambling eggs and baking scones, Charlie was pondering and puzzling over quite a lot of things too, mainly relating to something odd that had started happening to her just after arriving at camp, namely, she had begun to see strange things in shiny surfaces. One of the first things she saw—when gazing at a large stainless steel pot in which she was making chili—was a scene of a carousel horse come to life and running around on its own in an orchard. A couple of days after seeing the carousel horse, while looking in a bathroom mirror, she saw a scene of a river and someone slipping on a rock and falling into the water.

She didn’t think she was hallucinating because she was not seeing these strange things unless she was looking at something in which she was also able to see her own reflection. And she was not seeing the odd events as though in reflection behind her, but more like they were playing out on a television screen in front of her. Seeing two additional visions in other kitchenware, along with a replay of the river scene, she was, naturally, confused and upset, which had caused her to avoid using certain pots and pans in the kitchen, as well as to refrain from looking in mirrors. But, of course, cookware and mirrors were not the only shiny

surfaces with which she might come into contact. When passing the koi pond behind the main office of the camp, in the surface of the water, she saw an image of several girls on the camp stage performing a dance, during which, one of the girls twisted her ankle and then had to visit the first-aid cabin.

When Maryann Wise actually did twist her ankle the next day while rehearsing for a performance on the camp stage, Charlie was even more upset in realizing that one of her visions had come to life. However, in not knowing what to do, other than worry, she simply tried to put the images out of her mind, while hoping and praying that she wouldn't see any more unsettling things.

The second week at camp passed fairly smoothly for both Vini and Charlie, and both were thrilled on Saturday when Tami and Sami Richmond arrived for a week's stay. The twin sisters had bunked with Vini and Charlie the previous summer and were again assigned to share their cabin so that the girls could all spend time together. In addition to taking a long hike on Monday evening, the four friends went swimming together Tuesday afternoon.

Mid-morning on Wednesday, when Charlie was bringing cookies and brownies to the kids in the hippotherapy program, she saw another vision on the side of a shiny metal bucket sitting on a shelf in the stables. Though she knew it often helped people to talk to friends about things that were troubling them, for some reason, Charlie was reluctant to tell Vini about the strange things she was seeing.

However, as the two friends were taking a horseback ride together on Wednesday evening, while Tami and Sami were at movie night, Vini mentioned that she had been having odd dreams, three times now, about peacocks and snakes. Charlie wasn't good at dream interpretation, so she had nothing to offer other than just polite listening; but since the girls were sharing, Charlie did end up telling Vini that she had been seeing odd things in shiny surfaces. "I've been seeing things in mirrors, pots in the kitchen...some disturbing things even, like life events playing out. In a reflection in the koi pond, I saw a girl sprain her ankle on the camp stage; then Maryann did sprain her ankle. I couldn't see that it was her in the surface of the water, because it's been hard to see faces clearly; but the girl did look like Maryann—long dark hair, about

the same build.” Though it was somewhat troubling to talk about, Charlie felt good about getting this off of her chest.

From her research Vini knew exactly what this was, and she told Charlie, “Some people are able to see future events in reflective surfaces. It’s part of the gift of prophecy that God gives to some people.”

“More like a scary curse, than a gift,” Charlie replied.

“No,” Vini insisted. “It’s definitely a gift, not a scary curse. God must think you can handle it, or He wouldn’t have given it to you.”

“But I even saw a carousel horse running through an orchard before we went to Plum Acres,” Charlie said. “So if I was supposed to warn you about an event that I saw ahead of time, but I didn’t know what I was seeing and didn’t know that I was supposed to warn you, then how is that a gift?”

“Because you are just now discovering it, and you’ll have to get used to having it,” Vini replied. “I imagine it would take anyone awhile to figure out what they are supposed to do with the gift of prophecy.” After a few moments’ thought, she added, “I’m not convinced you were supposed to warn us. I think we were meant to have the demon encounter. I learned something from it, about possession, and about being wary of that type of attack.”

While Charlie was relieved to have some sort of explanation about the visions, she was not at all sure she was happy about having this gift. Like most people, there was a lot about God’s methods she simply couldn’t understand, naturally, since His ways of thinking are so much higher than the reasoning of human beings. She even still had trouble understanding why God had given her a thunderbird as a protector, rather than something like a little troll. Since she had been afraid of heights most of her life, Lyydu didn’t make much sense, as far as them traveling around together at least. While it didn’t bother Vini to soar around miles above the earth on Tulko, the few times Lyydu had taken Charlie flying had been terrifying for her. While thunderbirds were actually connected more to the earth than to the air, there was no denying their power and speed in flight, which were probably at least equal to that of wind horses. Despite knowing that she was perfectly safe atop Lyydu, Charlie still didn’t like it much when they needed to go places together.

Back at the bunkhouse, again thinking of her fear of heights, Charlie suddenly remembered a time when she was eight and she fell from a friend's treehouse and broke her wrist. Details were hard to recall, but Charlie felt it was likely this was the reason she was so afraid of heights. With Tami and Sami not yet back from the movie, Charlie told Vini about the incident and mentioned something else that had just occurred to her. "Since you had a demon after you, and Ben and Sam have a pair specifically hunting them, I wonder if a demon might have pushed me from the treehouse. I didn't remember tripping or slipping or anything like that. At the time, it just seemed like I kind of fell for no reason."

Without thinking, Vini jokingly replied, "I doubt it was a demon. They probably would have been too afraid of you to come near. Remember, I was afraid of you when you were eight."

With Charlie staring at her in almost disbelief and in obvious discomfort, Vini instantly realized that she had hurt her friend's feelings, and very quickly said, "I'm sorry; I shouldn't have said that." After a deep breath and a pause, while looking apologetically at Charlie, she added, "As far as the demon thing, it's more likely Lyydu was already watching out for you. He might have been around when you were younger, but you just didn't know it."

When Charlie simply looked away, Vini somewhat awkwardly went on. "Even now, I'm sure you're perfectly safe with Lyydu around. He's what the demons would have feared too much to come near you. That's what I really meant."

Indeed, if looks and mannerisms were anything to go by, Lyydu, in all of his foreboding sternness (which was almost scary in intensity), would have been considered to be twenty times more powerful than Tulko; though a side-by-side comparison wasn't really anything to go by since each creature had different skills. But with thunder being more mysterious than wind, as far as the magic and wonder behind it, Vini thought it likely that Lyydu was more powerful than Tulko.

Charlie didn't respond and remained quiet after this, even after Tami and Sami arrived back to the cabin.

A short while later as she tried to fall asleep, Vini felt very guilty about bringing up the past. Though Charlie and her cousin, Dana, had bullied Vini in third grade, Charlie had since changed, expressed

remorse, and had several times told Vini how sorry she was for what happened. And Vini had definitely forgiven her; so it seemed strange for the memories to have resurfaced again in such a way. In fact, Vini was very surprised that she had responded jokingly, when Charlie had been discussing something so serious, namely, that a demon might have pushed her from a treehouse, which actually wasn't a far-fetched idea, given everything the girls had experienced over the past year or so. And if Lyydu had been around when Charlie was eight, whether the fall was caused by a demon or not, he might not have been able to save her from the broken wrist because it would have been too early in her life to reveal his presence to her.

The next morning, while taking a break from hippotherapy, Vini sought out Charlie in the kitchens to again apologize. "I'm so sorry," she said, giving her friend a hug.

"It's okay," Charlie replied, with a soft smile. "I realized that it was Satan making you say that. He sometimes worms his way into our thoughts when we least expect it. And he sometimes makes people say things they don't really mean."

"Oh my gosh, you're right!" Vini exclaimed, instantly recognizing the truth in Charlie's words. "I can't believe I didn't recognize it at the time. I mean, I've definitely forgiven you."

"I know," Charlie said. "And I've forgiven myself too, which is important."

"And I don't ever even think of it anymore," Vini said, still somewhat incredulously. "But now I understand why it reared its ugly head. Satan is very sneaky. One mention of being eight years old, and he wormed the whole third-grade thing back into my brain."

Smiling and nodding, Charlie said, "Yes, he's very clever. But apart from that, I've thought a lot about how I used to be. As far as the bullying, I think I was just really insecure and acting out because I didn't know how else to act. And I guess I thought being tough and mean might win me friends; it seemed to work for Dana; she always seemed to have a lot of friends. But, of course, they weren't true friends, being just about as mean and nasty as she was. Plus, when she pushed me around, I sort of felt like I had to become a bully to protect myself, like the idea that if I bullied first, I'd be less likely to be bullied."

“That makes a lot of sense,” Vini said. “I’m sure glad Dana moved away. I don’t think we would have ever been friends if she had stayed.”

“True,” Charlie said, “though if I had ever got myself into some of the things she’s gotten into, my dad would have already killed me, so being friends wouldn’t have been a possibility.”

Smiling, Vini recognized some truth in Charlie’s joking words. Being a strict disciplinarian, Vini could well have seen Mr. Orr locking Charlie in an attic for six years straight, rather than see her get into the kind of trouble her cousin managed to get into like drugs and theft. Dana was, in fact, currently confined to a juvenile detention facility, one she had run away from, twice.

On Thursday afternoon, with Alma joining them, Vini and Charlie went with Tami and Sami to a jewelry-making class, where they all made bracelets and earrings to exchange with one another, plus a few extras to give as gifts to other friends and family.

On her own after dinner, Vini didn’t feel like reading, so she took a stroll by herself through one of the camp meadows, currently chock full of wildflowers. The flowers made her think of her recent dreams, which had been very strange, not only because several had been very similar, almost like repeats, but also because they seemed to be growing, both in detail and to some degree in size. Two nights this week she had again dreamt of the sand dollar and peacock feather planted in the flower bed in Mrs. Doyle’s garden; but something was definitely added, something quite large, in the form of a dragon sitting in a far corner of the garden with a rainbow fairly low in the sky arched directly over the creature’s head.

The dragon in the garden made Vini think of Mr. Galloway’s estate, across the street from Doyle Mansion, because Mr. Galloway liked to make topiaries out of his bushes, some of which Pizzo had brought to life to help save Vini and her friends from a demon attack in the spring.

Mr. Galloway had recently mentioned that he might make a sleeping dragon out of a cluster of viburnum bushes, so maybe that’s what Vini had been thinking of when dreaming about a dragon in the garden. But that didn’t quite make sense because the one in the dream was a sort of burnt orange color, not green like a viburnum topiary dragon would be. Running the dream back in her mind, she had seen something else new in the garden, namely, a dove in the flower bed very

near the peacock feather and sand dollar. This area of the country had mainly ground doves, Inca doves, and mourning doves that were mostly pinkish gray in color, though they often did have other colors mixed in with their plumage. The one in her dream was somewhat of a dark amber color, gleaming almost in a metallic way with the sun on its wings; and it reminded Vini of a half-tarnished penny left in the sunshine so that it could catch glints of light, and catch the eye of someone passing by.

Since the peacock had killed the copperhead in the first dream, the snake no longer appeared in her subsequent dreams, just the feather and sand dollar, now with a dove, dragon, and rainbow added. Come to think of it, the dove was very like one she had dreamt about once before, also in connection with a dragon that she found in her dream by following a winding path through the woods.

Vini had been able to take the afternoons of Tuesday and Thursday off work—and ended up taking Friday afternoon off as well to go swimming with Tami and Sami—because she would be working on Saturday, which was when the twins left, saying goodbye to both Vini and Charlie very early in the morning as the pair set off to the stables and kitchens respectively.

On Saturday evening, Charlie and Vini went horseback riding together around the ranch. Since Camp Burberry Wiffle had once been a large cattle ranch, it was perfect for riding, with many areas still waiting for the girls to explore. In a small hidden valley, Tulko made a brief visit to greet Vini and Charlie, and to frolic in the air with Valo for a short time, the trailing colors of the pair painting an exquisite picture in the sky of softly-glimmering gold, magenta, peach, azure, and viridian. This was of course the imprints the horses briefly left when zipping about in such a speedy fashion. Since Tulko and Valo were excellently camouflaged to blend in with sky and horizon, unless someone knew they were looking at wind horses, they might simply think they were viewing a spectacular sunset, or perhaps the colors of a distant storm backlit by rays of even more-distant sunshine. As the magical pair departed to help calm a storm near the Philippines, the glowing and scrolling masterpiece they left hanging in the sky quickly faded.

Charlie and Vini spent a quiet Sunday at the camp. After the morning church service, they mostly read and took a couple of short walks the rest of the day. In the evening, Vini mentioned to Charlie that she might not go with the group of campers on Monday to a neighboring ranch bordering a river to go fishing as she had planned.

“I think you should go fishing,” Charlie said firmly, nodding in emphasis. With Vini looking quizzically at her, she added, “I had two visions of someone falling into the river, and the second one was more detailed than the first. I wasn’t sure if I should tell you, but I think you need to be there to help save the person.” With Vini still looking at her questioningly, but now also with a somewhat surprised expression on her face, Charlie went on. “I think it makes perfect sense that you would help save someone from a river. With your swimming experience, you would be the ideal person for that.”

Vini had to agree, since had been an excellent swimmer since she was a little girl. Now, being on the water polo team at school was helping her to keep up her skills year round. “But I’ve never taken any lifesaving classes,” she worriedly told Charlie. “And two of the lifeguards always go on the fishing trips, so they would be more qualified to save someone.”

“I don’t think that’s going to matter,” Charlie said, again firmly. “You definitely need to be there.”

“Then I’ll definitely go,” Vini answered. “But do you know who’s going to fall in, so I can stay close and keep an eye on that person?”

Shaking her head, Charlie responded, “No, unfortunately the scene was somewhat blurry looking, both in the mirror and in the pizza pan. I could definitely make you out, because I know you so well. But a lot of these girls look alike in their blue shorts and white camp t-shirts. She has brown hair, but that doesn’t help much since most of the campers here this week have dark hair.”

“I’ll just try to watch everyone,” Vini said.

“I’m coming too,” Charlie said. “Things are well in hand in the kitchens, and I want to see if I can pinpoint any likely candidates for you to keep watch on.”

This relieved Vini, to know that Charlie would be going to the river with her.

Although Charlie was never able to identify anyone who might be in danger on the fishing outing, her visions turned out to be completely accurate.

Vini was closest and did not hesitate to jump into the river when Christy Pulaski fell in. As a powerful swimmer, Vini reached Christy very quickly, where she helped to support her until one of the lifeguards made it to their position, at which point, Vini simply got out of the way to allow the lifeguard to do her work. Christy had slipped on a rock. Hitting the cold water had basically knocked the wind out of her, and she panicked. Unable to get her bearings in the moving water and going under a few times, she may well have drowned if Vini hadn't reached her as soon as she did.

Meanwhile, on the bank, Charlie had been praying while closely watching the lifesaving efforts.

Thankfully, once pulled out, though Christy was still somewhat choking on water, she was conscious and breathing, and so did not require either rescue breathing or CPR.

In their cabin later, as Charlie and Vini were discussing the incident, Charlie said. "I think I might have seen an angel near the river when you were in the water with Christy. I saw a flash of light that seemed to fade somewhat slowly, too slowly to be a reflection on like a metal cooler or a hub cap or something. Plus, it was kind of in the shadows of some trees, so I don't think it could have been a reflection."

"I thought I saw a light too," Vini replied, "out of the corner of my eye when I was supporting Christy and waiting for the lifeguard to reach us. But I thought it might have been a unicorn."

"That's because you always have unicorns on the brain," Charlie said with a smile. "I'm pretty sure it was an angel, watching, to make sure you had things under control so that Christy wouldn't get swept too far downriver."

Smiling back, Vini answered, "I can't argue with you there, especially since it all sounds so beautiful and wonderful, the thought of angels watching over us all the time, and possibly rescuing us if we get our heads too far under water, both literally and figuratively." And the more Vini thought about it, she felt that Charlie's explanation of an angel as the light was more likely correct than hers because she knew she hadn't called a unicorn. So unless someone else had, or one had

just appeared, the slow-fading flash probably hadn't been a unicorn, despite light being associated with the creatures.

Though Charlie was happy that everything had worked out so well, especially as related to her somewhat scary visions, she still wasn't sure how she liked having the gift of prophecy, mainly because of a vision she hadn't told Vini about that involved Ben and Sam. It was something very distressing that she had seen in the pane of a window. However, although she was troubled by the vision, she was actually hoping for a repeat of it, so that she might see more details and better understand exactly what was happening in the scene. So far, she didn't see how what she had seen could possibly come true; and she actually thought it likely that her mind or eyes had been playing tricks on her. Although the sprained ankle and near-drowning at the river had turned out to be real, there was no guarantee that all of the images she was seeing would come to fruition; and she truly hoped and prayed that this would be the case with regard to what she had observed with Ben and Sam.

Whatever might end up happening, instead of dwelling on the unclear images, Charlie chose instead to concentrate on cooking, which always helped to take her mind off of troubling thoughts.

On Tuesday evening, the main carpenter of the camp, one of May Burberry's cousins who lived on the ranch and helped to maintain the buildings, held a birdhouse-making workshop. Vini attended because she wanted to learn a few skills with tools, and because she wanted to make birdhouses for both her mother and Violet.

After retiring to the bunkhouse for the night, Vini read for a while, with a flashlight because Charlie had already gone to sleep. However, she nearly woke her friend up with a squeal of excitement when, in an old mythology book, she found something tremendously exciting, in the form of a lengthy hand-written note penciled into the white space at the end of a chapter about dragons.

“It's no accident that dragons are often portrayed as sleeping. They are sleeping, awaiting a time when the Holy One will call them into action, like sleeper gears of the Clock of the Universe that are just waiting for the clock to be wound so they can spring into action. Related to springing into action, since they have incredibly striking

speed and accuracy, this might be part of the reason that dragons were once called sky serpents, the name having fallen into disfavor because the word, serpent, is so often associated with Satan, whose name is a misnomer with regard to dragons in general because the creatures have pretty much always been on the side of good since the dawn of time.”

Here again was a mention of the Clock of the Universe. But the handwriting of the penciled note was not Mrs. Doyle’s, which Vini was very familiar with by now, having studied so many of her journals. *Maybe it was her husband Gerard’s handwriting*, Vini pondered. How exciting to find something about the term, sky serpents, too.

Flipping pages in a different book, she came across a paragraph mentioning demon possession, which naturally caught her eye given what had happened to the horses at Plum Acres Ranch. The writer of the book simply said that some people were more prone to demon possession than others, specifically people who had lived through traumatic events and were still fragile from the experiences. Since this just sounded like common-sense information, and seemed unrelated to her dragon research, Vini didn’t think much more about it. Another book she had recently read said that demon possession of human beings was rare because demons were generally only able to possess creatures whose minds were susceptible, in specific, ones with less brain power than most humans. This too had sounded like common sense to Vini, and she hadn’t spent much time thinking about it.

However, a troubling dream during the night, from which she awoke both shaking and sweating, definitely made her start thinking a good deal more about the subject of possession. In the dream, she was sitting in the middle of a large room in a folding metal chair like those used in the bible study group held in the basement of her church. Surrounding her, standing in a circle, were over twenty people Vini was closely acquainted with including friends, family, one of her pastors, and several neighbors. Although these were all people Vini knew fairly well, and liked, and trusted, she could feel in her bones that something was very wrong, and that danger was present, somewhere in the circle. In uneasily glancing around her, unable to see anything other than the familiar faces, she suddenly realized that one of them was not who he or she appeared to be. One of them was possessed; she was sure of it.

And it wasn't just her powers of discernment telling her this; she could feel the presence of the demon in the room. At that moment, she woke up, without any clue as to which person in the room might have been possessed.

Was this a premonition, like Charlie's visions? Or was it just because she had read the paragraph in the book, and then recalled something else she had read on the subject? As hard as her brain tried, Vini couldn't figure out whether possession of someone close to her was something that was meant to happen (if it hadn't already happened), or if her mind was suggesting it. She was, of course, very worried that the dream would turn out to be true. However, at this point, she didn't have enough information to do anything proactive about it.

In thinking about what she had read recently, she felt a lot of people could be susceptible to possession because stressful things happen to just about everyone at some point in their lives. She didn't think anyone she knew was particularly weak-minded, but what if that theory was wrong?

Knowing that demons had to be somewhat close to plant their thoughts, common sense told Vini they would have to get even closer, close enough to touch, in order to possess a person. With creatures like Tulko and Lyydu around, she felt it likely demons wouldn't be able to get close enough to her and her friends to possess them. Even her twelve-year-old brother, Preston, had a protector, though one very different than Vini's. Eleta was a vritsee, a creature somewhat like a tiny colorful walking stick. Vini didn't know much about her powers, other than the fact that she was very strong for her size, having saved her backpack from theft by yanking it away from Kugari's grasp at the same time the bible and binder were stolen from her room. Still, the dream must mean something; and feeling the need to be ever wary, Vini reminded herself to pay attention to things going on around her. Again wishing she had better powers of concentration, she feared someone close to her could become possessed and she might not even notice.

Smiling, Vini once more thought of her brother, who was coming to the camp with their parents on Thursday to have lunch with her. Vini was looking forward to the visit. Although she had been glad to have a break from him for part of the summer, because Preston could be

somewhat loud and annoying at times, he was also a pretty great brother, and Vini found she missed him.

Vini and Preston still had two grandparents remaining, their father's father and their mother's mother, both currently living in other states. Their grandfather was paying for Preston to have martial arts lessons this summer, this being something of an extension of Preston's interest and growing skill in archery. Vini had declined their grandfather's offer to pay for lessons of a similar nature for her. Not having much of an interest in anything like jujitsu or karate, she also didn't particularly care for archery, having tried it a couple of times at the mansion under Sam's guidance. Grandfather Aberdeen had then simply sent Vini some money, which she was saving for college.

Although this was Vini's final full week of camp, and her parents would be picking her up on Saturday evening, the family had lunch with her on Thursday because they were going berry picking for the afternoon at Plum Acres Ranch. Catching up with news from home was easy because nothing much exciting had happened in the past two and a half weeks. While Vini of course didn't share what had happened at the carnival, she did tell her parents that she was able to help one of the camp lifeguards save someone from the river.

"This proves those early swimming lessons were a good idea," her mother said, "along with all of your swimming activities since then."

While they were enjoying dessert of apple cobbler, Charlie made her way out of the kitchens to say hello to Vini's parents and Preston. Only visiting with the family for a couple of minutes, she hastened back to work in order to start cleaning up from lunch and begin prepping for dinner.

Taking a break from chopping carrots and making pasta salad in the afternoon, Charlie took a stroll along one of the camp's shorter nature trails, where she came upon Wendy Walters, also strolling, but not looking very happy about it, or anything else, as her countenance wore a very forlorn and unhappy expression. Her posture too appeared slumped and downcast.

When Charlie asked what might be troubling her, Wendy confided that her dog, a collie, had died of old age the previous week.

As the two sat down together on a flat boulder, Charlie said, "I had a dog when I was little, a poodle; he died too."

“It’s not just that Pongo’s gone,” Wendy said, dejectedly. “I talked to my youth group director right after, and she told me dogs and cats don’t go to heaven. Oh, she wasn’t being mean,” Wendy hastened to add. “She was just being honest. Then I asked my parents about it, and they also don’t think pets go to heaven.”

Taking a thinking pause before answering, Charlie said, somewhat slowly, “I think...from my prayers and from talking to God...that what they told you is both right and wrong.”

“What do you mean?” Wendy questioned.

“I was really upset when Boomer died,” Charlie replied, “so I prayed very hard about it. And God told me that, although pets don’t have the same kind of souls that people do, they definitely live on in heaven because they live inside the people they were attached to. As we live and grow and become what we’re meant to be here on earth, a lot of what we become still lives on when we go to our eternal home. Since Pongo was such a big part of your life, when you go to heaven, I’m sure a part of him will be there too.”

“Wow,” Wendy said, in a much less dejected manner. “That sounds so true. I’m sure you are right.”

In the remainder of her spare time before the dinner rush, Charlie baked Wendy a special giant frosted chocolate chip cookie, shaped and decorated exactly like a collie, to remember Pongo by and to share with her friends.

Charlie very firmly did believe that what she had told Wendy was the truth, except that Charlie had never had a poodle. Nor had she ever prayed or talked to God much when she was little, this being something that had grown in her walk with Jesus just in the past year or so. However, in wanting to help, she didn’t think the fib she had told, to try to get Wendy to open up and talk more about what was bothering her, was all that bad. At least, when Charlie prayed later, to ask forgiveness for making up a story, she felt like God was telling her that He wasn’t too upset with her about it.

At nearly the exact time on Thursday afternoon that Charlie was talking to Wendy, Vini found herself needing to console Alma in a similar manner. Vini was on her way to her cabin to change clothes (having spilled some leather conditioner on her shirt and shorts while tending to a couple of saddles), when she passed Alma, sitting on a

bench outside her own cabin, looking very crestfallen, to the point that the expression on her face was, almost literally, as gloomy as a dark cloud.

In questioning her, Vini found out that Alma hadn't wanted to go to the craft shack with her bunkmates to make a dream catcher because one of the girls didn't like her.

"No matter how nice I am to Lana, she just acts mean, or says something ugly or sarcastic to me," Alma said sadly.

Sitting down on the bench beside her friend, Vini said, "You know, I remember reading in a book somewhere that ten percent of the people we meet won't like us, for no particular reason. It's just the way it is, probably due to human nature. And no matter how hard we try to get those people to like us, it will never happen. So there's not much point in putting any energy into that. My suggestion would be for you to just be as polite as you can be towards her, but put your efforts and energies into being friends with other people."

With Alma thinking this over, Vini added, "Plus, it's more important to please God, to get Him to like us, rather than trying to please people." Lowering her voice, she told Alma, "One of the swim instructors—I won't say which one—doesn't like me."

"Whoever it is, that person is probably jealous because you're such a fabulous swimmer," Alma said.

"Well, there you have it," Vini answered. "Lana is probably jealous of you for something that you do better than she does."

Smiling, Alma agreed. "I am better at horseback riding than she is; maybe that's it."

"But there's something else to consider," Vini went on. "People can change, and it's important to give people a chance. She might not be as mean as you think; maybe she's just having a bad week. You know, Charlie and I weren't always the best of friends."

"That's hard to believe," Alma said.

Smiling, Vini replied. "It's true. We didn't like each other at all in grade school. But that's all changed now. And it's because we both changed, and gave each other another chance."

Before going to her cabin to change, Vini accompanied Alma to the camp chapel so that they could pray, which made them both feel better, lifting not only their spirits, but the spirit of the whole day, because it

somehow did seem as though things were brighter and fresher and altogether more pleasant than they had been just a short while before.

On their way back to the cabin area, admiring butterflies and flowers along the way, Alma said, "I think I might be oversensitive right now because I'm missing my parents on their missionary trip."

This was news to Vini. "I didn't know they were on a missionary trip," she said, surprised. "I thought they were just on a long vacation."

"No," Alma answered. "My dad is doing something with water wells in places where they don't have clean water to drink and to use for farming. Water wells are what he does for work; he designs and works on them. And my mom is just so good with people; she decided to go with him, to do things like cook in the tents that make meals for people who are hungry. She'll probably pray with people too."

"That's so amazing," Vini said.

"This is the first time they've done this," Alma added, "but they hope to go every year from now on. And I'll probably go with them in the future. They just thought I was a little young right now. Plus, this being the first trip, they had to get to know the ropes. They wanted to get a feel for everything to make sure I'd be safe on a trip like that, and figure out if there would be something useful for me to do while I'm there. I wouldn't want to be in the way."

Vini's advice was largely right regarding Lana, who was having something of a bad week in her life. Although the girls didn't particularly become good friends, Alma's persistent politeness, along with the fact that she made Lana a bracelet in the craft shack as a gift, did soften Lana's attitude and demeanor towards her.

With Vini scheduled to come back for three weekends, there was no big to-do about her leaving camp on Saturday. However, because Charlie was not coming back, at least not during the summer, the cook, whom everyone just called Cookie (mainly because very few people knew that his name was actually Thaddeus), organized a small party for her on Friday evening. Since her father was picking her up right after breakfast on Saturday, which meant she wouldn't have time for goodbyes later, at the party, Charlie gave Cookie a handmade set of wooden measuring spoons that she had picked up at the farmers' market and that she had saved as a parting gift for him. Unknown to Vini, Cookie had a large collection of spoons, of all shapes and sizes, from all

corners of the world it seemed; and he nearly cried, as happy as he was, when Charlie presented the set to him.

The next morning, Charlie returned home to an incredible surprise, as a small white toy poodle puppy greeted her in the living room as she and her father entered the house. Her mouth falling open as she set her suitcase down and bent to pick up the wriggling mass of fur that nearly smothered her face with frantic licks and puffs of puppy breath, Charlie right away named her new friend, Boomer.

Mr. Orr had adopted the poodle from the pound as a surprise for his daughter when one of his construction workers told him that he had found the dog as a stray, but couldn't keep him. Boomer was probably about half grown, but was still very puppyish in his demeanor; and it was obvious he had been getting into a fair amount of mischief around the house, as evidenced by a couple of chewed-up shoes that were not old and had definitely not been given to him as toys.

It seemed Lyydu had already met Boomer, and warmed to him. Looking out her bedroom window into the back yard a short while later as she was unpacking, Charlie saw the pair together, neither creature looking at all concerned or uncomfortable around the other, though they did look rather odd in contrast, Boomer being smaller than a basketball, while Lyydu, even while sitting, was equal in height to a very tall man. When it started to rain, rather hard, the thunderbird outstretched one wing slightly, which Boomer scurried under for protection, sitting still and looking very serious until the rain eased a few minutes later and he could once more tromp around the yard exploring and playing with a knotted-up sock by tossing and shaking it around in a furious fashion.

Although Mr. Orr didn't know about Lyydu, if he had happened to look out the back windows, he likely wouldn't have noticed the thunderbird who was using his excellent powers of camouflage to blend in perfectly with both a tree trunk and the privacy fence. In fact, Charlie could only make him out because she was used to seeing him, though he was sometimes hard even for her to pick out of a landscape setting. Of course, he could always become invisible around people to stay hidden, this being a power that was both common and perfectly suited to thunderbirds, and that Charlie reckoned was because no one could ever see thunder. Lyydu was also extremely fast, and often fled quickly upon sensing the presence of people approaching. If anyone happened

to see the departure of a thunderbird, they likely would think they had seen a small wisp of smoke or cloud streaking the sky that would dissipate almost too quickly for the eye to make out clearly.

Charlie was very pleased to have a pet, and she felt this was a sign from God—that he had forgiven her for making up a story. So she could now stop feeling guilty about the fib.

Chapter Three

A Hop, a Skip, and a Jump

When her parents brought her home on Saturday night, Vini contemplated the rest of her summer. Though she was done with her full-time job at the camp, she was still going to be busy for the next few weeks working at the mansion nearly every weekday until returning to school. And the next three weekends were going to be busy because she would be back at camp.

Vini was happy to be busy for the rest of the summer, especially since she wouldn't be seeing much of Charlie who was busy herself, mostly making breakfast and lunch for her dad's construction crew each day. Charlie was also taking a community Driver's Education course because her father was planning to get her a used car for the fall. Though she would still be fifteen at that time, having work experience evidently qualified her for an early license. Vini had thought about checking into this herself, but since she wouldn't be getting a car anytime soon, it didn't seem like a good use of her time, or the money spent on the class fees, especially since she could take Driver's Education in school her junior year anyway. Though that was still over a year away, since she was only just now heading into her sophomore year of high school, Vini felt she could definitely wait. Even if she got her license early, without a car, she would still be riding the bus to and from school. Even with a car, riding the bus would be the more economical choice. And with the mansion only about a quarter of a mile from her home, it would be silly (and a poor choice for the environment) to drive to and from work.

Though her job was officially as housekeeper, Vini often did other things besides cleaning, which Violet and her husband kept up with fairly well on their own in order to keep things tidy. Plus, whenever they were visiting, Albert and Louetta always helped with the cleaning, so chores hadn't been piling up while Vini was at camp. On her first day back at the mansion, she helped Violet pack for a vacation to

Portugal, which was the first of two summer trips Violet and Dave would be taking. The couple would be leaving the upcoming Thursday. After the vacation of nearly three weeks, they planned to return briefly to home before going to visit Violet's elderly aunt in another state whom Violet was hoping to persuade to come live at the mansion.

Violet had made checklists in order not to forget anything while packing; however, by Vini's estimation, she was planning to take nearly half of her shoes and clothing, which would be impractical, if not impossible, to travel with. So Vini helped, as best she could, with thinning the pile.

"I'll probably need sweaters because it will likely be chilly in the mountains and at night times," Violet said, when Vini indicated the three cardigans already in one of the suitcases.

"But one will be enough," Vini advised. "You could always wash it by hand if you needed to."

"You're right," Violet agreed. "I'm glad you're helping me pack; I need someone to talk some sense into me."

Next, it was decided that two pairs of boots would also be staying behind. Though Violet often liked to wear boots, one pair would definitely suffice for a trip such as this.

Popping his head in briefly while they were packing, Dave joked, "Remember to ask Vini what she thinks about the six swimsuits and four yoga outfits you have stashed in the bottom of the suitcase." Evidently, there had already been considerable discussion on paring down what was being taken.

"But they don't take up much room," Violet called to him, as he sauntered off.

"I didn't know you did yoga," Vini said.

"I don't," Violet answered. "The clothes are just very comfortable for lounging around in."

Eventually, though Violet repeated how small they were, it was decided that two each of the swimsuits and yoga wear would be more than enough.

Louetta and Albert were staying longer at the mansion than they had in previous summer visits, eight full weeks this time. Their parents had decided that the siblings were both old enough to be mostly on their own while Dave and Violet were traveling. With Vini, Sam, and Ben

there for good chunks of time, and Mr. Galloway acting as an emergency contact, Mr. and Mrs. Nolan felt their children would be just about as safe as they would be at home, especially since the mansion property was entirely fenced, which tended to keep most people out. Plus, Vini's parents were just down the street if anything out of the ordinary were to happen. Of course, Mr. and Mrs. Nolan didn't know about such things as the demons. But even if they had known, the "being as safe as at home" thing would still be true because Tulko, Pizzo, and the firebirds were constantly keeping watch. Lyydu was there occasionally too, generally when Charlie was visiting the mansion. Other than checking in with their parents every couple of days, Albert and Louetta were to use good judgement and behave themselves, as per their parents' orders. Since the siblings had good common sense and had never been prone to disobedience, these were easy rules to follow.

Based on what would work out best with various people's schedules, Violet chose Wednesday of this first week of Vini's return to reveal the subbasement library to everyone, which had been kept a secret known only to Violet, Dave, and Vini since its discovery roughly two months before.

Charlie was baking a cake in the kitchen for a small early celebration of Louetta's birthday, which would fall while Violet and Dave were traveling. Sam and Ben were both in the garden pruning and weeding. As Dave and Vini called everyone together, Violet led the bewildered group down the stairs to the basement where she opened a door concealed behind a bookshelf before leading them down two more flights of stairs to the hidden room that Vini generally called the downstairs library, to distinguish it from the upstairs one, but that Albert immediately began calling the cavern, for as enormous as it was. Indeed, if a mouse had entered, he may very well have gotten lost for about a year, since the subbasement library was easily ten times the size of the one on the second floor of the mansion that already would have been considered an extremely large library to be situated in a private home.

Albert, Louetta, Sam, Ben, and Charlie were all completely floored, in the same way Vini and Violet had been on the day the library had been found, and Dave too, when Violet had later shown him.

When everyone had a chance to take it all in, and take a tour, and while they were all lounging in the reading area of the library which contained a large sectional couch and several recliners, Violet told everyone that she wanted to keep the library a secret among those presently in the room, also telling them, "I'm limiting access right now, because I've just started cataloging everything. It's all very well organized; but I checked Cousin Frances' computer (situated on a large desk near the entrance of the library), and I can't find any kind of an inventory or anything." This was not surprising, as Mrs. Doyle didn't care much for computers, or very many other tech things, for that matter.

"So I'm going to make the cataloging a priority project for the fall," Violet went on. "Meanwhile, only Vini gets the code to the keypad that unlocks the door. Since she has full access to the books, based on Cousin Frances' will, I want to make sure she can get at everything anytime she wants. For now, I want things to stay mostly in place while I work on the project because it's going to take a while. So just go through Vini if you want to explore, or borrow books, or look at the maps, or whatever."

Everyone agreed, and no one felt put out that Vini was the only one, other than Violet and Dave, with the code so far.

"By all means use the library," Dave encouraged. "Just be discreet because we think it's good not only to limit access but also knowledge of it. Since we're still trying to figure out what's down here, we think that's a good idea."

"Especially since a lot of it is valuable, and religious in nature," Violet said.

"Exactly," Vini agreed, specifically thinking of the stolen bible. "We don't want demons making off with anything."

Since a lot of Mrs. Doyle's belongings were not only valuable in a monetary sense, but were also of historical importance, too many people knowing about the library might well jeopardize the safety of the contents.

"We'd like to wait a bit to tell Preston," Dave added.

"He never borrows books anyway," Vini said, thinking of the upstairs library that the rest of them all made regular use of.

Though Violet and Dave often hired Preston to help Sam and Ben with chores around the mansion, he was busy right now with martial arts, swimming, and spending time with a couple of friends in the neighborhood, mainly scootering and biking around. Plus, one of his friends had a treehouse that they regularly spent hours upon hours in. As far as what they did up in the tree for so long, the nearest his sister could figure out was that they were reading and trading comic books, while dreaming about being superheroes. Vini thought she'd be more likely to bird watch, perched up so high. *Whatever, to each his own.*

Preston was aware of the many magical goings on at the mansion, such as Pizzo and the firebirds; and while he was good about keeping these things secret, Violet felt he might be a little unguarded about sharing information of an everyday sort, like the existence of a large library under the basement of the mansion. Basically, everyone in the assembled group agreed with Violet that it would be best to wait a while before telling him about it.

For her three weekends back at camp, Vini's parents would be dropping her off on Friday evenings and picking her up again Sunday nights. With the camp being only about twenty miles from their home, it was no trouble for one or both of them to do this each week. On the three Saturdays, Vini would be working in the hippotherapy program. Since the program wasn't offered on Sundays, the camp owners had scheduled Vini to help the camp counselors chaperone three outings, the first one to a fish hatchery, the second to the local Renaissance Fair, and the third to a jumprope competition. Since these were basically like field trips, Vini was very excited about going.

May Burberry accompanied the group to tour the fish hatchery because she was thinking about installing a large bass pond on the camp property. With plenty of man-made tanks (which were what ponds were often called in this area of the country) on the ranch to choose from, she felt she already had a good starting point. It didn't seem like it would be a difficult project to dig one out to about double the size, to make certain the pond would stay full enough during drought times, and then wait for the rains to fill it so that it could be stocked with bass.

For this outing, Vini mostly kept company with Alma and a girl named Fawn Michaels. As they passed one of the breeding tanks, they happened to see a larger fish swallow a smaller one. Though this was a

perfectly natural occurrence, something about it completely unsettled Vini; and she continued to feel this way for quite some time afterward. There was just something unnerving about it that she couldn't get out of her mind. But she didn't think it was the fact that one fish had eaten another that was really bothering her. It seemed more like the image of it, that kept playing itself over and over in her mind, meant something else, like maybe it was a sign or a message; but at this point, she couldn't figure out what it might actually mean.

May's carpenter cousin was driving the bus for the outing, and he made a surprise stop at an old-fashioned soda shop in a small-town drugstore on the way back to the camp. Two young girls were playing hopscotch on the sidewalk outside the drugstore. It generally wasn't a problem for them to play outside the store; but with all of the foot traffic from the camp bus, the sidewalk was a little more crowded than normal. With her pebble currently on square three, one of the girls said with a smile, "Excuse our game, please."

Inside the drugstore, Vini ordered a cola float with chocolate ice cream, while Alma chose a strawberry sundae and Fawn had a chocolate malt with extra cherries and whipped cream on top.

The hopscotch girls were still playing when Vini, Alma, and Fawn came out of the soda shop. Since it had taken the two soda jerks quite a while to serve everyone, even with the drugstore manager helping, several of the camp crowd had just received their treats. With a little time to spare before boarding the bus, and with Alma window shopping at a boutique next to the drugstore, Fawn and Vini accepted the offer of the hopscotching pair to play a game with them. What fun! Vini hadn't played hopscotch since she was a little girl and thoroughly enjoyed herself.

Back at camp, just before dinner, Vini and May were hiking one of the camp trails in order to check out a tank that May thought she might choose for the bass pond. Rounding a dense patch of brush and low trees, the hikers were completely startled when a peacock came screaming in, landing just to one side of the path in front of them where it proceeded to stomp and tear to shreds a copperhead snake that had been hidden in the grasses on the edge of the trail. Looking much like the peacock in Vini's dream, the bird then swallowed all the bits of the

snake before taking flight, very much as the one had in her dream, nearly straight up.

Speechless for a few moments, because she realized they had just had a close call, as they again headed toward their destination, May told Vini, “The ranch next door has peacocks, so I don’t know why I’m surprised, except that I’ve never seen one take off like that before. What a sight!”

“It was really beautiful,” Vini said, though she was still shaken, not only by the snake, but by part of her dream basically coming to life.

May seemed less unsettled; and sensing that Vini had just had a scare, she said, “Most snakes will flee, if given the chance. Just don’t corner them.”

Vini was nodding. “And a lot of them are brightly colored, as a warning, so other creatures can know to stay away from them.”

“Exactly,” May agreed, “though that one was a little too close for my comfort, especially being in the grass where we would have had trouble seeing him.”

May and Alexandra seldom killed snakes on the camp property, not even the poisonous ones, because the snakes helped to keep the numbers of rodents and undesirable insects in check. So, rather than killing them, it was better to simply stay out of their way, and teach visitors to do the same. Plus, with so many predatory birds in the area, along with critters like foxes and skunks, snake numbers were never a problem.

A little farther along the path, they found a peacock feather, which May picked up. Presenting it to Vini, she said, “Peacocks regrow their feathers every year.”

“That’s really interesting,” Vini replied.

“They are a very fascinating bird, and many people consider them to be magical,” May answered. “They can eat the poison of poisonous snakes without being harmed. And they were once thought to have powers of alchemy; you know, turning plain metals into valuable ones. And a pair of them are said to guard the gates to heaven; that’s why they are featured in a lot of religious paintings.”

Vini hadn’t known any of this about peacocks; and she hadn’t thought to look any of this up, though she now felt she should have done so. She had been mainly relying on books containing information

about magical creatures in the hopes of finding something relating to peacocks that might help in her search for dragons. But she now realized something important that she had been missing—the fact that real and everyday life was often completely magical. *Of course*, she thought, *it's simply the way God designed everything. What a dunce I am! Of course peacocks are magical, maybe even as magical as Pizzo and Tulko. Nature is completely magical.* And she suddenly remembered something one of her biology teachers had once said. *“How could anyone look at a butterfly and not believe in magic?”*

Both libraries at the mansion were like many other libraries, filled with books on a vast array of subjects, including things like birds and butterflies; and Vini resolved to look up peacocks as soon as possible.

After returning from having a look at the tank, Vini made sure to say goodbye to Alma, who was packing because her parents were picking her up the next day.

While waiting for her dad to pick her up outside the camp office, in thinking of hopscotch, Vini played handclap games and cat's cradle with Fawn who had decided to wait with Vini to keep her company.

Back at home, while pondering the dream of the snake and peacock, Vini wondered if she might have a gift similar to Charlie's; but instead of seeing things in reflective surfaces, she was seeing future events in her dreams. If this were true, since she was dreaming of dragons, then finding them was sure to happen. *Of course it will*, Vini thought, and she again scolded herself. *I'm such a dunce. If God is leading me toward dragons, of course I'm going to find them, dreams or no dreams.*

Before starting to clean the bathrooms and kitchen at the mansion on Monday morning, from the upstairs library, Vini selected and set aside several books about birds to take home with her in the evening.

After lunch, while helping Louetta with laundry in the basement, she also briefly visited the downstairs library to select a couple of Mrs. Doyle's journals to take home as well. She hadn't taken any to camp because she felt they were too valuable to have out of the library for long periods of time. Now, anxious to get back to her research, she definitely wanted to get back into reading them. In casually flipping through one of the two she had randomly chosen from the shelf, right away, she found a mention of peacocks, in specific, a note about the

importance of their symbolism. This made her look forward even more to delving into both the journals and books in the evening.

Sweeping the back porch later in the afternoon, Vini noticed Sam in the garden pruning bushes and she waved to him. She could also feel the presence of Tulko somewhere nearby, though she couldn't see him.

Sam gave a small wave back, but didn't come to talk to her, not even when moving closer to the back porch in putting leaf trimmings on the compost pile. Though she thought about going out to talk to him, Vini decided against it, mainly because he seemed to want to be by himself a lot lately. She had noticed this when they were all touring the downstairs library. While the others were looking at various artifacts in the cases, he had preferred to sit at a table and flip through a book. Though it was slightly unusual for Sam to keep to himself so much, Vini shrugged it off because he always was more reserved than his brother.

The books Vini had chosen did contain a lot of information about peacocks that was very interesting, but nothing in particular relating them to dragons. And the two journals had no mention of them, other than the one note about symbolism. From this, and remembering what May had said about the gates to heaven, Vini made herself a mental note to remember to look for information about peacocks in the huge sections of religious books in both libraries, probably specifically in books about religious symbolism.

Although she didn't find anything more about peacocks in Mrs. Doyle's journals, Vini did find something very interesting about dragons, namely, that they were thought to be more related to birds than to reptiles. "Birds fly, while snakes and lizards generally don't," one entry read. A few pages later in the book, Vini read something that fairly shocked her, not because of its content, but because she had once written the exact same thing in her own journal. "How can a Chinese dragon fly if it doesn't have wings?" Vini hadn't read or even looked through this particular journal before; she was sure of it. So it was so amazing that she and Mrs. Doyle had had the same thought. Of course, this was not the first time this had happened. They had always been very alike one another, despite their age differences, so much so that Vini had several times thought of Mrs. Doyle as being less like a grandmother to her and more like a twin sister. Still, even as twins, it

was still amazing for two people to have the same thoughts, like connected to each other some way in the universe.

As she was walking to work on Tuesday morning, Mr. Galloway stopped Vini to give her a flower from his garden, a lovely rose of a soft violet-gray color called a Sterling Silver rose.

At the mansion, after placing the flower into a glass of water, Vini anxiously stared out the windows in the direction of the side gate because Charlie was due to stop by for a visit.

As busy as everyone had been lately, Charlie hadn't yet been able to introduce her friends to Boomer, whom she was bringing with her. Catching sight of the pair as they entered the gate, Vini bounded outside, with Louetta and Albert in tow, and Ben arriving in short order from the back gate, where he generally parked his bike. Though happy to see Charlie too, everyone was vastly more interested in greeting the squirmy puppy than in saying hello to their human friend; and the playful and loveable personality of the poodle quickly charmed everyone.

Even Pizzo, who wandered outside a few minutes after Charlie and Boomer arrived, seemed completely taken with the dog, and ended up playing fetch with him using a bright purple squeaky ball that Charlie had brought with them. Hoisting it over his head, a somewhat large feat since the ball was nearly the size of a grapefruit, Pizzo managed to throw it about thirty-five feet. Though surprised by this, Vini didn't know why she should be, having been one of Pizzo's practice targets for a full year now. In addition to things like grapes and small office items such as paperclips and erasers, Pizzo had once thrown a whole apricot at her, hitting her in the shoulder from a distance of about fifteen feet.

Carefully carrying her rose with her when she left work in the afternoon, Vini was surprised when Mr. Galloway stopped her again to give her a large bundle of the silvery flowers. "For both you and your mother," he said.

"Thank you, Mr. Galloway," she gushed. "They are absolutely beautiful."

On Wednesday at work, Vini decided to take one of her breaks in the garden in order to read on a wooden bench beside the fountain Violet and Dave had installed shortly before leaving for their trip. However, she ended up more daydreaming than reading. The fountain

was something Mrs. Doyle had planned as an addition to the garden, but hadn't quite gotten around to. The concrete structure was very large, having three tiers above its base pool which was about eight feet wide. When the pieces of the fountain arrived by delivery truck, the driver had used a small forklift to bring them through the wide rear gate of the estate. The driver had then helped to get the first piece settled into the packed sand base Dave had prepared for it before hoisting the second one into place with the forklift and helping to feed the water line through it before getting it too settled into position. Dave and Ben had managed to lift the final two pieces into place, with Violet helping to feed the water line through. Though quite a challenge to set up, the fountain was exquisite, and Vini felt sure Mrs. Doyle would have loved it, especially the sound of it.

Gazing at the water gently falling from the scalloped edges, with a book in her lap, Vini felt very peaceful and happy. Though the bench she was seated upon was largely in the shade, the top of the fountain was bathed in a wide patch of sunshine that was somehow sneaking its way through nearby tree limbs. As she watched dribbles of water catching the sun, which made them look like strings of jewels, a dove landed in the middle tier of the fountain to take a bath. A moment later, a second dove joined the first, then a third, all of them making a good job of splashing while bathing. The flying droplets catching glints of the sun's rays made it look as though someone was throwing handfuls of diamonds into the sky.

After bathing, the feathered trio sat side-by-side on the edge of the middle fountain tier, preening while drying their wings. While they were roughly the same size, the three were widely varied as far as their coloring; and their movements, along with the sun shining on them, lit up the colors in their feathers in a rather spectacular manner. The one nearest Vini appeared to be a rosy gold color with orange accents, and she was reminded of the radiance of a beautiful sunset. The second bird was mainly turquoise and green shades with hints of yellow, perhaps similar to the shades of varying depths of ocean waters as seen from above. The third was a subdued mix of purple and soft charcoal gray, but containing a glow that might have been likened to ashes caught in a light breeze dancing over embers in a fire grate.

Marveling at this display, Vini didn't know why she should be surprised to find doves to be so colorful; after all, they were related to pigeons, which were very colorful, often as much so as a rainbow. Thinking of a rainbow, she recalled the dove in her recent dreams, which then led her to wonder if the three perched in front of her, still preening, might be magical in some way. Aside from their glowing and shimmering, they looked fairly ordinary, though she did wonder if they might be tropical doves, if a few had perhaps found their way into the area from faraway places.

In addition to the glow and shimmer, the feathers of the creatures held a sheen that was almost metallic, like that of a hummingbird, or perhaps a peacock; and Vini smiled as the sun and sheen made her remember Psalm 84:11. "For the LORD God is a sun and shield; he bestows favor and honor. No good thing does the LORD withhold from those who walk uprightly." In doing her best to walk uprightly, God certainly hadn't withheld anything from Vini lately, who still found herself amazed sometimes at the wonders constantly surrounding her.

With a healthy breeze kicking up, serving to shift both nearby tree limbs and the slant of the sun, glints of light bouncing off of the doves' feathers and falling water became almost too intense to look at, interrupting both Vini's thoughts and her gaze, which lowered to the base of the fountain where she noticed something odd in the surface of the water. The wind was affecting more than just the tree limbs in the garden; in blowing across the water, it was creating a pattern of ripples that looked, very distinctly, like a blooming rose.

Her attention again drawn upwards as two of the doves suddenly flew off, Vini turned her focus to her book, intent on reading at least a few minutes before going back inside. However, after making it through only a couple of short paragraphs, Vini suddenly had an eerie feeling creep over her, almost as though she was being watched. Glancing around, as far as other creatures in the vicinity, she saw only the remaining dove perched on the middle tier of the fountain; and the bird was indeed staring, not at Vini, but at the book open in her lap.

Surely doves can't read, she thought, unless magical ones can. But not from that far away, I wouldn't think.

However, this suddenly made Vini remember something from a lecture at one of her youth group meetings. Professor Fulhausen, who

taught Mythological Studies at a local university, was often in demand to give talks at various churches because he was an expert on magical creatures, especially as related to biblical history. In his most recent lecture at her youth group in the spring, he had said that dragons have good eyesight. This made Vini wonder if doves might too.

Of course they do, her mind answered. Probably all birds have good eyesight, so they can see bugs clear across the yard and go after them. That's probably where the term "eagle eye" comes from, from birds having excellent eyesight for hunting and other activities.

With her powers of discernment, connecting this to the professor's lecture didn't seem too farfetched, particularly because her dream of the dove and dragon in the garden was also speaking to her. Her mind still on the issue of good eyesight, Vini suddenly thought of God, all knowing and all seeing, and Psalm 32:8 suddenly came to mind. "I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you."

Thinking of God, the image of a peacock feather, specifically the eye, suddenly popped into her brain.

Though these types of thought sequences were sometimes just the result of her overactive imagination, Vini always paid attention to them, because she often thought God might be trying to tell her something. She felt certain this was the way He spoke to many believers, by getting inside their heads in a way that was much different than the way Satan and his followers tended to invade human brains, particularly since it was unlikely that they would quote psalms to her.

With her mind wandering so much, Vini was done trying to read; plus, it was time to be getting back inside. Closing the book and standing up, her gaze once more fell to the fountain pool, in which the pattern of a rose was still visible in the water's surface.

At home in the evening, upon receiving a letter from her pen pal in Italy written on a lovely notecard sporting a motif of tea roses, Vini realized she was once again receiving messages from God; this time, having something to do with roses.

On Thursday morning, while dusting the enormous globe in the center of the upstairs library, Vini found her eyes drawn to a large tapestry featuring a medieval banquet scene. Some of the colors of the fine clothing worn by the lords and ladies reminded her of the colors of

the doves in the fountain. Moving closer, Vini was surprised to discover that one of the women seated at the table was holding a rose in her hand of a deep pink color. Even more surprising was the presence of a peacock in the foreground of the scene, a detail she had also never noticed before despite having dusted the tapestry several times during the past year. Shaking her head, Vini was amazed. However, having gotten messages from God from the mansion's tapestries before, she realized that the rose and peacock might both be divine additions. Examining every inch of the wall hanging, she found nothing else significant, at least, not as far as her eyes could discern.

Having lunch with Louetta, Vini asked about Albert, who had been hidden away in his room a lot lately reading. "Is everything okay?" Vini wondered. "I know he usually spends a little more time outside."

"Everything's fine," Louetta assured her. "He's just missing his girlfriend."

"Oh, that's right," Vini said, remembering the same issue with Albert from the previous summer. "Shannon, isn't it? Or is it Susan?"

"It was Susan last year," Louetta responded, "but they broke up. Now, it's Bethany."

"How strange," Vini remarked. "I thought he was so...you know...in love with Susan."

Nonchalantly, with a shrug, Louetta answered, "People change; their feelings change, which is why I plan to just stay married to my art and avoid all of that, especially the turmoil and heartache."

Smiling, Vini had to agree, as she was very glad she didn't have a boyfriend. And she wasn't planning to look for one anytime soon because she wanted to make sure she had enough time to do important things like find unicorns and dragons. If she had a boyfriend to worry about, she might have trouble fitting in things like water polo or the church youth group activities that she was fond of and that were helping her grow as a Christian. Schoolwork might even suffer. No, she had firmly decided that there would be plenty of time for boyfriends in the future, and probably the far future would be best.

In the spring, Charlie had gone out a couple of times with Craig Anderson, a basketball player from school, but had quickly decided on no more dating for a while. For one thing, she was simply too busy with volleyball and catering jobs on the side of her normal school

activities. Plus, when it came to guys, Charlie had said her dad was just crazy-controlling, and had described to Vini the huge lecture he had given Craig before they went to a movie. Plus, her dad had insisted on driving them to and from the theatre. “What could happen in a movie, in a public place?” Charlie complained.

While Tulko was taking Vini for a ride on Thursday after work, high in the clouds, he decided to entertain her by making a few cloud sculptures. He often did this, as part of his playtime; and he was a very talented artist, as all wind horses are. First, he made a series of animals he had seen recently while soaring over a zoo—lion, wallaby, giraffe, elephant, crocodile, koala bear, and zebra—with Vini applauding the whole time. After finishing the cloud zoo, he made an enormous and incredibly-detailed rose. Smiling, Vini told her friend, “Okay, I’m definitely on the lookout for something to do with a rose.”

A small toss of Tulko’s head in nod confirmed to Vini that God was indeed sending her messages regarding roses. Now, she just needed to continue to pay attention to figure out exactly what about roses would end up being important.

When her parents dropped her off at camp on Friday evening, Vini was very much looking forward to her exciting and busy weekend, especially the Sunday trip to the Renaissance Fair.

On the bus to the fair, she reminded herself to be on the lookout for roses because there would probably be a good many of them in a venue such as this.

With six chaperones in total on the outing, the girls from Camp Burberry Wiffle became quite spread out over the fair. Vini found herself mostly keeping company with two of the quieter girls, Prentiss Johnston and Meg Winters who, after seeing a couple of shows, mostly wanted to explore the market, which contained nearly a hundred vendor tables and booths. Surprisingly, Vini saw not one rose the entire time they were meandering about over the fairgrounds.

Stopping at a table filled with dulcimers, Vini admired the hand-crafted instruments. Though she didn’t play any musical instruments, she thought they were absolutely beautiful. As Meg and Prentiss moved on to the next table, Vini started to follow, but halted when the dulcimer vendor indicated one of the instruments Vini had been looking at and said, “One dollar.”

With the cheapest of the dulcimers priced at sixty dollars, Vini looked quizzically at the man, as he repeated, very firmly, “One dollar.”

After a moment of silence, with the vendor himself looking a little confused, he slowly added, “Something just told me...like in my brain...very sharply...to offer this to you for one dollar.”

Recognizing that this was probably God leading her to buy the instrument, Vini tried to give the man a twenty-dollar bill, though she knew this was still very low, compared to the work and materials put into the dulcimer. However, with her priority on saving, and since she was planning to purchase a few things like clothes and shoes before school started again, she reasoned that twenty was enough to part with for something she would likely never use. But perhaps she would give it as a gift to someone. With this idea in mind, she pulled a ten out of her wallet to add to the twenty. Thirty seemed like a good amount, though still an incredible discount; and she hoped she wasn't insulting the man by offering too little.

Shaking his head, the man insisted, “One dollar. I'm sure of it. No, wait...three.” Something is now telling three. Either will be fine. If you can afford three, instead of one, that's fine; but I won't take thirty.”

Handing him the ten, while saying, “Three then,” the man gave Vini seven dollars in change, along with the lovely dulcimer, which he had slipped into a soft cloth bag for her.

Catching up to Meg and Prentiss, Vini didn't have time to wonder much about the odd exchange because her ears suddenly perked up upon hearing one of the vendors hawking, “Earrings, scarves, glasses—get your rose-colored glasses right here! Bracelets, barrettes, beads!”

The woman calling out her wares ran a small booth filled mainly with jewelry, but a few other items as well such as belts, scarves, and what appeared to be sunglasses.

Deciding that sunglasses were probably not what her rose messages were referring to, Vini looked over the jewelry, admiring a particular bracelet before a pair of glasses did indeed catch her eye, mainly because the color and sheen of the lenses reminded her of the rosy-gold dove that had visited the fountain.

Noticing Vini's interest, the vendor said, “Ah, rose-colored glasses; an excellent choice.” With this, the woman picked up the glasses and handed them to Vini.

With so many rose messages this week, she thought, this must be it. Though it did seem odd that this was what she had been led to—glasses with a copper-colored metal frame and lenses of a lovely rose color.

“Are these sunglasses?” Vini asked. “They are not very dark.”

“I don’t know,” the vendor replied. “I traded for them because the lady didn’t have any money but really wanted a pair of earrings.”

As Meg was buying a necklace, Vini tried the glasses on. Since her eyes didn’t strain, she didn’t think the lenses were of a corrective type. “They must be sunglasses,” she said. “And I do like the metal frames.”

Something about plastic frames made her sweat more when wearing sunglasses, so this would be a good buy for her, as an item she would likely use.

In keeping with the mysticism of the fair, sounding much like a palm reader (but also a good saleswoman), the vendor said, “Anyone who looks through these rose-colored glasses will always see life in a more beautiful light.”

“Did they even have glasses in Renaissance times?” Prentiss asked in a somewhat skeptical tone.

“Yes, they did,” the vendor replied. “We only have to look at paintings from that time period to know that spectacles were plentiful.”

“Okay,” Vini said. “How much for the rose-colored glasses?”

The vendor thought for a few moments before saying. “If you buy the bracelet you were looking at, I’ll throw in the glasses, twelve dollars for both.” This was no problem for the woman, since the glasses hadn’t cost her anything, just a few glass beads and some wire to make the earrings she had traded for them.

“Okay,” Vini eagerly replied. “What a terrific deal.”

Indeed, she was truly astounded that she had gotten a bracelet, which she planned to give to Charlie, and sunglasses and a dulcimer all for fifteen dollars, which seemed just about like a steal.

A little while later, heading to the bus parking area, Vini remarked to Meg and Prentiss, “I always thought that people associated with carnivals and fairs liked to make a lot of money. Here I am proved very wrong. And it just goes to show that we can’t prejudge people.” In fact, Vini knew that she was not supposed to judge people at all. But she did often shy away from salespeople, since so many of them were pushy, and she was not sure how many of them might be dishonest.

As far as the dulcimer, since she wasn't particularly musical and likely wouldn't have wanted to take lessons, Vini thought she might give it to a friend at church who played both guitar and fiddle. But, even aside from the rose messages, something was definitely telling her to keep the glasses. Though she couldn't tell why at the moment, she was sure they were somehow going to be important.

After stowing the dulcimer on the bus, Vini joined Denise Wu beside a small man-made lake adjacent to the bus parking area, where the girls skipped stones while waiting for the rest of the outing participants. Not any good at this, and laughing at herself, the most Vini could manage was three skips, and most of her attempts turned out to be one. "Better at plopping than skipping," Vini joked.

Denise wasn't much better, though she did manage three skips on each of her seven attempts, which ended up surprising both girls, as far as her consistency.

The week back at home was fairly routine for Vini, with the exception of going Wednesday afternoon with Louetta and Charlie to visit a local Victorian mansion called Crayle House that was similar to Doyle Mansion, the main difference being that it was open to the public for tours. The library, though much smaller than either of the ones at Doyle Mansion, fascinated Vini the most, in particular, some of the relics housed in glass cases, one of which was supposed to be a piece of dragon hide, roughly the size of a salad plate. The description in the case noted that the skin had a piece of a scale attached to it. Both Charlie and Louetta were very skeptical, particularly Louetta who said somewhat scornfully, "That looks more like a dried-up feather than a piece of a dragon scale. So I'm guessing this is just a hunk of skin from a large bird, maybe an ostrich." However, Vini, with her powers of discernment, felt the item was exactly what it was purported to be—a small piece of dragon hide. A fancy teatime in the mansion's parlor followed the tour, which the girls thoroughly enjoyed.

While doing research on Thursday in the subbasement library, Vini made a discovery in one of the map cabinets of another piece of dragon hide. Though it wasn't labeled like the one at Crayle House, it looked very similar, except that this one was approximately three times as large. At nearly three inches thick in certain places, it had barely fit in the deepest of the map drawers.

Carefully removing the hide, which was extremely heavy, she laid it on one of the library tables in order to examine it closely. While the skin from the day before had only one small piece of what was presumably a dragon scale, this one had two good-sized chunks, not only larger (each approximately the size of one of Vini's hands), but also more detailed, displaying a pattern of lines and streaks that even more so resembled feathers than the one on the hide at Crayle House.

The scales, or feathers, or whatever, were extremely hard. *Their armor is of course one of their gifts*, Vini thought, lightly knocking her knuckles on one of the scales, which felt a lot like stone. However, as she held the hide up to the light, a somewhat difficult feat for as heavy as it was, the colors and smooth sheen of the scales reminded her more of metal than of stone; and for some reason, this made her think of the metallic feathers of the doves in the fountain.

Pushing away the thoughts of doves as a distraction, while reminding herself that focusing on a relic rather than her research was also a distraction, Vini returned the dragon hide to the map drawer, rearranging a couple of other small objects so that it would fit better and not get caught when opening and closing the drawer. Though she probably wouldn't have needed to be ginger with something this tough, she didn't want to take any chances on damaging the hide.

Returning to her research, she found a note in a book stating that, at one time, dragons were pretty much exclusively called sky serpents; but since the word, serpent, was often associated with Satan, it became more popular for the word, dragon, to be used. Dragon scholars, especially, didn't want the creatures to be constantly associated with Satan because it was obvious from legend that many dragons were on the side of good, not evil. While Satan was sometimes called a dragon, he was more often called a serpent. In another book, Vini found a mention of dragons being connected to the stars, in that they tended to look like stars in the sky whenever people happened to see them. In reading a little more, Vini was surprised that the writer was not talking about shooting stars, or even something appearing to move more slowly like a comet, but more something stationary, as if hovering in a fixed position. Since she imagined dragons to be fast, and had found in her research that others believed the same, she would have thought that, if seen in the heavens, they would be like streaks of light, not something

like actual stars. The writer went on to liken this aspect of their appearance to simply being part of the dragons' natural camouflage.

Charlie came to the mansion on Friday morning to visit with her friends because she wasn't going to be around for the next two weeks. As if Boomer wasn't enough of a surprise for one summer, her father had surprised her with a second incredible gift—two weeks of training at a culinary school.

"It's just like a camp!" Charlie said excitedly. "But instead of swimming and horseback riding, I'll be cooking."

"Not much of a break from work," Ben said, taking a seat on the back porch with the girls while taking a break from weeding and watering the vegetable garden.

Albert and Louetta, who were just bringing out glasses of lemonade for everyone, agreed.

"But I'll be learning from masters," Charlie countered. "And these are some of the best culinary teachers in the state."

Charlie had brought Boomer with her. After playing fetch with Pizzo for a time, the poodle took the little troll for a ride. Astride Boomer's neck and clinging to his collar and curly clumps of hair as they bounced along, Pizzo couldn't be happier, as evidenced by the wide grin on his face, both grinning and smiling being rather scarce expressions for the pook trill, whose personality spent much of its time hovering between the states of largely peevish and seriously pensive. They looked an odd pair, trotting around together, even odder when the pair became a trio, as Lyidu swooped in to follow Boomer and Pizzo about in long strides.

A short time later, as Albert and Louetta went back inside and Ben returned to weeding and watering, Charlie and Vini took a stroll in the gardens.

Admiring the flower beds, Charlie debated whether or not to tell Vini about something that had been troubling her. Though she was starting to get used to having the gift of foreshadow, in the form of the visions seen in reflective surfaces, Charlie still struggled with the issue of what to do with the information she was receiving. Shortly before the snake and peacock encounter by Vini and May at camp, in the shiny hood of a car, Charlie had seen the event take place. While she had definitely recognized Vini, from knowing her so well, Charlie hadn't

realized that it was May with her. She also hadn't been able to see exactly where on the camp property the pair was.

Having not warned her friend, after Vini told her about the encounter, Charlie was relieved that nothing bad had happened. Since the peacock in her vision had definitely killed the snake, Charlie had been less worried about Vini's safety and more worried about making her friend nervous or jumpy in constantly looking around for snakes while at camp. So she had kept silent. Charlie had said a prayer, for God to protect Vini and her companion from the snake, though she realized that God was likely already doing this in providing for the peacock to come and kill the snake.

Since returning from camp, her visions had been occurring slightly less often. But despite the decrease in frequency, they were still upsetting, in particular, the one involving Ben and Sam, which had replayed itself twice in the past week. What was most distressing was the fact that the event had become even more detailed and shocking. Initially, Charlie had only seen the twins fighting one another, like a fist fight. The most recent vision not only showed the fight, but it became more violent, with one of them ending up dead. Since the boys looked so much alike, with only small differences noticeable to help people tell them apart, Charlie couldn't discern in her vision who was who, so she had no idea who actually ended up on the ground, bleeding and then dead, basically murdered by the other.

Reminded of the story of Cain and Abel, Charlie shook her head as she forced herself to replay the vision in her mind, in the hopes that she would see something she missed that might provide an answer. In not seeing anything new, frustrated, she still didn't see how it could possibly be true, especially since the brothers had always gotten along fairly well, as far as Charlie was able to tell. There shouldn't be any reason why one would kill the other. Yet, that's exactly what happened in her vision in both the bathroom mirror and in the back of a large serving spoon.

In trying to work out this puzzle, she desperately hoped that some of her visions, this one especially, might simply be her imagination running wild. If not, then she hoped at least that what she was seeing might not necessarily be set in stone.

As the girls came to stand by the fountain, where Boomer and Pizzo were resting in the soft grass, in noticing that Charlie seemed abnormally quiet, Vini asked if she had something on her mind.

“No,” Charlie responded, with a soft smile. “I was just thinking about what I need to pack for my trip.”

Though the fishing-excursion vision had turned out to be correct, and the snake-peacock one as well, Charlie still didn’t see how the image of the twins fighting could be. Since the visions were often fuzzy, as though she might be viewing them through thick glass that wasn’t all that clean, maybe she wasn’t seeing super accurately. So maybe her imagination was filling in some details.

After a good deal of thinking, Charlie came to the conclusion that, at this point, she wouldn’t tell anyone about this. *It’s probably not real*, she told herself, *just some sort of sick imagining. People often have weird and sometimes violent thoughts, possibly related to the overload of violence we see on TV, in movies, and even from reading certain books.*

However, while trying very hard to talk herself into the idea that the death of one of the twins was simply the fancy of her imagination, deep inside, she knew the vision was probably perfectly correct.

At home, after packing for her trip, as she continued to ponder the issue of Ben and Sam, Charlie prayed, to ask God to guide her. *Dear God, I am so confused. Please help me. Please direct my steps, lead me, and tell me what I should do. Please give me wisdom.*

Immediately after the prayer, she was able to think more clearly; and while making dinner, a plan formed in her mind.

While she was still not ready to tell anyone that one of the twins might end up killing the other, she would keep an eye on them. Though she had been attending Vini’s church, she had gone a couple of times to the one Ben and Sam went to. When back from culinary school, she would do the same. Since the twins’ church was actually closer to her home, this would be perfectly plausible. Also, the doctrine and style of teaching were very similar to those of Vini’s, so that shouldn’t be a problem. The time of the Sunday service was earlier, which would be more convenient for her. In putting her brain to the matter, she might also find other ways to spend more time with the brothers, maybe asking them to teach her archery as they had Preston.

Other than the plan, she didn't know what else she could do. If she told either Vini or the twins, she might end up changing something that was supposed to happen.

But was that what she's supposed to do, change something?

Even after deciding on a course of action, it was all still very confusing.

Again praying to God, she wondered why she wasn't getting an answer. After all, this was something incredibly important, not some small issue like which pair of shoes she should wear.

However, while washing dishes after dinner, she realized she likely was getting an answer of sorts.

I probably just don't understand what He's telling me, Charlie told herself. Or maybe He hasn't told me yet, but will in His own good time. So right now, I need to be patient.

Vini was always talking about being patient and waiting on God's timing. Though worried, Charlie realized she needed to do the same. She also reminded herself that she was not supposed to worry; though, unfortunately, she had been a worrier for as long as she had been alive.

However, while she knew she needed to break the habit, this did seem like something that would be appropriate to worry about—the death of a friend. If her visions had started earlier, in the spring perhaps, and if she had seen ahead of time Mrs. Doyle sailing from the widow's walk of the mansion, pushed by a demon, Charlie might have been able to save her. So maybe that's what she's supposed to do here, save one of the twins from death.

But at this point, something inside her was telling her to wait, again, the timing thing.

Resolving to wait, she immediately felt more settled, as though she had made the right decision, and as though the Holy Spirit inside her was telling her this was correct.

Smiling, she realized this was God's answer.

Lesson learned, she told herself. It's what I asked Him for, guidance. He always answers. And I need to remember that the Holy Spirit is always inside me, ready to guide me.

Reading the bible before bedtime, Isaiah 30:21 just seemed to jump out at her. “And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, ‘This is the way, walk in it,’ when you turn to the right or when you turn to

the left.” After reading this, she felt even more settled, almost like calmness was washing over her.

It’s not just timing, she thought, *but trust in God*. This was indeed true, as sometimes all it took for things to go smoothly was for a person to have trust in God—that He would make all things work together for good.

Continuing to read, she found another verse also speaking to her, part of Isaiah 41:10. “...fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you....”

Of course He will, Charlie realized. *He wouldn’t have given me this gift without some kind of instruction or help in figuring out what to do with it*. With this reassurance, Charlie was able to stop worrying, for a time at least; and she rested well the night before leaving for her trip.

On Sunday, Vini was very excited because this week’s camp outing was to a state jumprope competition. A large group of staff and campers were mainly going to support Phoebe Redmond, who had attended Camp Burberry Wiffle for the past three summers, and who was a champion at jumprope.

Watching the competition, Vini was reminded of how much she loved playing Chinese jumprope in her younger years, which was a totally different kind of jumprope game, but was still a lot of fun.

Phoebe placed third in the event in which she was entered, and was thrilled because this was her first time in the higher age category of Fourteen to Sixteen. Having just turned fourteen, she was looking forward to improving during the upcoming year to possibly place higher in the next state competition.

Though she was done working at camp for the summer, Vini likely would return over the Christmas holidays for a few days to help with the hippotherapy program, as she had the previous year. So while saying a few tearful goodbyes on Sunday evening, she knew this was not by any means a final farewell.

Chapter Four

The Rain Dragon

Dave and Violet were back at the mansion on Monday, but without as much time for the sharing of photos and souvenirs as they would have liked because they had to get ready for their second summer adventure. After doing what seemed like a mountain of laundry from the vacation, Violet forced herself to pack much lighter for the next trip.

Through a series of back-and-forth letters and phone calls, Violet had just about convinced her elderly aunt, Eugenia Marigold Perkins, to come live at the mansion. After all, Violet and her aunt were fond of one another; and there was plenty of room, and would still be enough room for foster kids, a venture Dave and Violet were planning for the fall. The trip would hopefully seal the deal for Aunt Eugenia to come, and allow Dave and Violet to begin making the moving arrangements.

Late Monday evening, Albert cut his leg from running into a pickaxe in the garden shed. The tool normally hung on a sturdy hook; however, in recently using it to break up some large dirt clods, Sam had forgotten to rehang it and had simply left it propped against the lawn mower. In entering the shed late, at a time when the light from the day was waning, Albert hadn't noticed the axe and backed into it after retrieving a pair of gloves from a high shelf.

The cut turned out not to be too much of a problem to clean and bandage because Violet was actually a registered nurse, and had even worked full time at this in her younger years, shortly after her career as a pro softball player ended. While she had been working mainly as a housekeeper at the mansion for the past several years, because this had given her the flexibility to travel, she still kept up her licensure by taking on short-term private nursing jobs and by taking continuing education courses at a local college. Violet not only wanted to keep up her license because she had worked hard for it, she also hoped it might help her and Dave in getting accepted into the foster care program. Dave being retired from his career as a high-rise engineer and being

home a lot might also help them qualify. He had also been in the Peace Corp and had done mentoring in a program for troubled youths, factors he and Violet hoped would work in their favor as well in getting accepted. With both of them in their early fifties, and because they had not had children of their own, they didn't think it likely they would be candidates for newborns to be placed in their care; but they hoped their situation would be seen as ideal for school-age children. With a fair amount of life experience under their belts, the couple would certainly have much to share with youths. Plus, in being healthy and not too elderly, they would have enough energy to be involved in school activities, sports, and other such things.

Albert had recently had a tetanus shot, so he didn't need to get one after the cleaning and bandaging.

Leaving before dawn on Tuesday, Violet and Dave would be gone for nearly two weeks this time.

On a break Tuesday morning in the upstairs library, Vini looked for information on peacocks, hoping to find something useful that might connect to dragons. While the scientific details relating to the birds were interesting—such as what they eat, their strength and size, and that peacocks are actually the male component of peafowl, with the females being called peahens—she didn't find anything she felt relevant. However, moving her search to the downstairs library, she found a book on the symbolism of certain earth creatures which featured a whole chapter on peacocks. In addition to the things May had mentioned, Vini discovered that a peacock was thought to have been present at Jesus' birth and that many people believe the bird to have the power to act as a talisman against evil. Since they regrew their feathers each year, peacocks were long considered a symbol of renewal, as well as immortality because their feathers didn't decay. Due to their mastery over snakes and venom, the birds were considered to be favored by God, and were thought to have even more magical powers bestowed on them by Him.

Vini was fascinated by the symbolism, much of which seemed to have a definite ring of truth. *Maybe peacocks are truly magical, like thunderbirds and wind horses*, she pondered, *but in a subtler way*. She thought it perfectly possible because many subtle and even mundane things could be magical, and quite extraordinary.

Upon returning the symbolism book to the shelf, Vini chose a couple of other books to take home before also selecting one of Mrs. Doyle's journals.

In the afternoon, having finished work for the day, Vini kept Louetta company in the music room. While Louetta painted, Vini read the journal she had picked. Pizzo was also present. To keep him occupied, Louetta had spread out several sheets of paper torn from a sketchpad onto the coffee table for him; and he was using her set of seventy-two colored pencils to draw. Funny, they were taller than he was; but he was making good use of him, though Vini couldn't quite see what he was drawing from her position on the divan across the room.

When Vini started to say something to Louetta, the little troll threw one of the green pencils at her. To him, the fact that she would dare to interrupt the artists at work was a crime, an absolutely horrible thing to do.

"Pizzo!" Louetta scolded. "She's allowed to talk."

Somewhat more quietly, under Pizzo's glare, Vini told Louetta, "I was just going to ask your opinion about one of Mrs. Doyle's journal entries. It's confusing. Listen to this: 'Mr. Galloway has an enormouse in his garden, behind the shed. I could just see it from the attic windows yesterday.' An enormous what?" Vini added, assuming that her former employer had simply accidentally misspelled the word, enormous.

Louetta didn't have an answer for Vini; but Pizzo was shaking his head and gesturing emphatically, as though anxious to get their attention in order to tell them something. Though he often made sounds, as far as Vini and Louetta knew, Pizzo never spoke actual words, or at least not ones that people could understand. And from things written about them in books and in Mrs. Doyle's notes, it seemed this was common to all puck trolls.

It seemed an enormouse was a certain type of magical creature, and Pizzo was trying to mime this to his friends. Making faces and using his hands, he tried to simulate a rodent with whiskers and sharp front teeth, having mouse ears and a long tail. Pointing to a nearby pouf, and again gesturing to indicate something quite large, he showed the size of the enormouse. When Vini and Louetta simply looked confused, Pizzo sighed a great sigh before shuffling the sheets of paper on the coffee table to get a clean one, upon which he started to sketch, using mainly

brown and gray pencils, but a couple of blue ones as well for accents to the fur.

Drawing close to the table, Louetta and Vini both marveled at the picture taking form on the paper, which was an absolutely enormous mouse, as indicated by the orange croquet ball Pizzo quickly sketched in next to the creature to give the girls an accurate perspective of the size of the magical rodent, to which Louetta commented, “Oh, he probably *is* just about the size of the footstool, or maybe a smallish pot-bellied pig.”

In addition to marveling over the mouse, Vini was completely in awe of Pizzo’s drawing skills. What a good artist he was! The more she found out about puck trolls, the more amazed she was by them. “Thank you, Pizzo,” she said, rather softly, but very sincerely.

Shrugging and waving the thanks off in a nonchalant manner, as if to say, *Whatever, no big deal*, Pizzo next slid down the leg of the coffee table before scurrying off to one of his secret tunnels in the walls of the mansion, accessed in this room by a piece of baseboard trim hinged on the inside to act like a swinging door.

Again assessing the picture, Vini said, “It’s hard to imagine Mr. Galloway not noticing what is basically a gigantic mouse roaming his gardens.”

Back to painting, and very intent on her work, Louetta simply shrugged.

Of course, Vini realized, *the enormouse is probably camouflaged most of the time, like Tulko*. Remembering the hobgoblin that had attacked Louetta the previous summer, Vini could well imagine enormice being hard to spot most of the time. *Maybe they can turn invisible like thunderbirds*, she speculated. *And they might even be shapeshifting because so many magical creatures have that ability, like demons and firebirds*.

In picking up the picture of the enormouse to admire and study it more closely, especially the tufts of blue hair adorning the creature’s ears and chest, Vini uncovered the drawing Pizzo had been working on prior to the mouse, and she nearly gasped aloud to see a picture of a large dragon of mainly purple hues sitting in the garden of Doyle Mansion with a rainbow outstretched above its head. Looking through the rest of the papers on the coffee table, she discovered a drawing of a

peacock facing off with a rather ominous-looking snake in a flower bed. *I wonder if Pizzo has dreams like mine*, Vini pondered.

While she didn't say anything to Louetta, Vini decided she would later ask the little troll about the drawings, if not in connection to his dreams, at least as to where he might have gotten his ideas from.

On Friday evening, Vini was getting ready to go to a program at her church that she was very much looking forward to. This was the third time Professor Fulhausen had lectured to her youth group. But this time, the audience would be much larger because several other church groups, of varying ages, had been invited.

Though she didn't have much to do to get ready, Vini was annoyed because Preston was hogging the bathroom. Since he had decided not to go to the lecture, she didn't think he should be dominating the bathroom when she needed to get ready.

He was also being very loud, rambling on about something after telling her he was done in the bathroom. After giving him an irritated look, while scrambling for her blow dryer and make-up bag and rushing to the bathroom, Vini tuned him out.

Vini's mother drove; and they were picking up Louetta because Albert, who might have driven them, didn't feel like going. He was having a rather surly week because he still missed his girlfriend, and Louetta confided in Vini that he was actually worried that Bethany might go back to her old boyfriend while Albert was gone. Mrs. Aberdeen was simply dropping the girls off and would be picking them up again after the lecture.

Ben was already at the church, Vini having invited him, and already had seats saved for them in the auditorium that was rapidly filling with excited guests. Ben was, of course, being Sam since the twins' secret was not yet out.

Having been told ahead of time that a wider range of ages would be attending the program, including many grade-school children, Professor Fulhausen geared his lecture to a slightly younger audience. He started with a story about a halcyon, a bird given the ability to calm seas so that maritime travelers could sail more safely. He also mentioned mermaids and mermen in connection to this because it was widely believed that these magical beings were some of God's special helpers, with powers

to summon and control creatures such as leviathans and enormous sea serpents.

While a slide show played on a screen behind him—mainly featuring paintings, statues, tapestries, and other forms of art devoted to magical creatures and some of their various adventures—the professor went on to briefly talk about unicorns, demons, nymphs, and ogres. This was all very interesting, but what captured Vini’s attention the most was an old fable called, “The Rain Dragon.”

The Rain Dragon had evidently been created for a special purpose, to help God with Noah’s flood. Not that God needed any help, but He often liked to allow certain creatures to assist with special projects. The dragon’s mighty and fiery breath was able to turn massive clouds sent by God into heavy steam that fell to the earth as rain. In addition to that, the dragon’s wings could evidently hold great amounts of water in order to distribute the rain to various parts of the planet, to make sure it was entirely flooded, the creature’s great speed helping him to do this. After performing his task, for forty days and forty nights, the dragon followed a comet’s tail in the sky to a warm and dry planet to bask in the sun’s rays and sleep, his reward evidently for doing such a good job with the flood. Apparently, sleeping was a favored activity among dragons.

“Most dragons of today are sleeping,” the professor went on. “That’s why we don’t see them. While sleeping, they often have fanciful dreams and sometimes giggle while dreaming; and these giggles turn into rainbows. So rainbows are not only a symbol of God’s promise not to flood the earth again, but are evidence that dragons are still present in the world of today.”

Professor Fulhausen ended his talk with a promise. “The next time I come, I’ll tell you the story of the Star Dragon.”

The story of the Rain Dragon may have been a fable, but it had a definite ring of truth to it for Vini, who didn’t want to dismiss anything, especially in knowing that even some of the oddest and most outlandish things could turn out to be perfectly true.

Vini and Louetta caught up with the professor after the lecture to invite him to come to tea at the mansion.

“If you have time, we’d love to have you,” Louetta said earnestly.

“I’m not teaching classes this summer, so I have plenty of time for attending tea parties,” he replied with a smile, before agreeing on Wednesday afternoon of the next week.

That night, Vini again dreamed that she was sitting in the middle of a group of people standing in a circle surrounding her, these being friends, neighbors, and family, all of which she knew fairly well. As in the previous dream, someone was not who he or she appeared to be. Someone was possessed. Vini was certain of it because she could again feel the presence of the demon, an ugly creepy-crawly feeling that centered in the pit of her stomach and made her feel not only nauseas, but also nervous, in a distracted and jumpy sort of way, to the point that she literally wanted to climb the walls, not just to escape the demon, but because she couldn’t think clearly, at least not well enough to determine who might be possessed or to make any sort of plan as to how to figure out who might be possessed. The distracted and nervous feeling reminded Vini of times when something troubling was pressing on her, but she knew the resolution to the problem was still some time off, like several days or even weeks away, like when she had had to wait for a hearing at the school administration office to determine if she would be expelled from school. She had, of course, been worried about this; but the waiting had actually been worse than the actual outcome, which was indeed expulsion. And although it had been reversed based on legal proceedings, having to wait for the whole experience to finally end had given her a nervous stomach and distracted thoughts for several straight weeks.

Although this was the same dream she had had before, one thing was noticeably different in that it had briefly started off with Vini seeing Miss Peachy and Telluride possessed and running wildly through the orchard at Plum Acres Ranch, before the scene quickly switched to that of the circle of standing people in which she was seated in the center. Seated so, a funny thought came into her head that she might have just won a game of *Musical Chairs*; and she almost giggled, except that there wasn’t anything funny about being in a room with a demon, especially one hiding inside another person.

As in the first dream, Vini woke before gaining any real clues as to which person surrounding her was possessed, though having seen the horses gave further reinforcement that her assumption that someone was

possessed was correct. She also still had no idea of a timeline, as to whether the possession had already happened, or, if not, at what point in the future it might occur.

In thinking everything through to try to find clues, she realized that something other than the horses was different. Preston was among the people standing around her, and he hadn't been in the first dream. And even though her mind was telling her that he was probably showing up in her dream because she had been annoyed with him over hogging the bathroom, she couldn't help but be suspicious. Mulling over the first dream again, she suddenly realized Ben and Sam were both in the second dream, while only one (and she couldn't quite remember which) had been in the first. What was odder than a fuzzy twin appearing in her first dream was seeing both boys in one place in her second because many of the other people in the dream didn't yet know that they were two people.

For all of her mulling, she could never figure anything definite out.

As usual, when troubled, Vini prayed, seeking guidance from God. Often after praying, she would simply open the bible randomly and read the first thing her eyes were drawn to. In doing so, she found that the specific passages almost always fit her current situation. On this occasion, the first part of Jeremiah 9:4 fairly jumped out at her. "Let every one beware of his neighbor, and put no trust in any brother..."

Again, this was reinforcement that someone close to her was not to be trusted.

But I don't think it could be Preston because Eleta is so often with him, Vini thought. Surely, the little vritsee would know if Preston was possessed and would do something about it. With this idea ringing very true, almost like a bell clanging in her ears, she pretty much ruled Preston out.

Vini was working Saturday morning. On the walk to the mansion, she overheard Mr. Galloway yelling at a truck driver who had run over a couple of bushes in his yard while delivering a load of much. Seeing him get so angry, Vini was immediately suspicious of Mr. Galloway, especially since he had been in both of her dreams. *What if he is the one possessed?*

Though this initially seemed like a sound possibility, in knowing Mr. Galloway so long, and in knowing that he could be somewhat hot

tempered, like a lot of artistic people, she decided fairly quickly that he probably wasn't the one possessed. Even if he were, Vini remembered something Mrs. Doyle had once mentioned that was called Memory Magic in relation to Louetta's paintings. Having been brought to life by Pizzo once before, several subjects of her paintings had come to life on their own, without the puck troll even being around, to save Louetta from the hobgoblin attack. Since many of Mr. Galloway's topiaries had also been brought to life by Pizzo, in order to battle a small army of demons, they surely were keeping watch and could take matters in hand if necessary to subdue one inside the person who had sculpted them. Plus, there was a puck troll living somewhere on Mr. Galloway's property, a girl puck troll. Vini had seen her once. Surely, she was keeping an eye on things as well.

Arriving at work, Vini waved at Sam who was weeding flower beds. Passing a pile of pulled weeds, likely awaiting placement onto the compost pile, she happened to notice sitting next to the pile an empty turtle shell that had the back half of a garter snake hanging out of it.

Again, just as when she had seen the larger fish eat the smaller one at the fish hatchery, Vini was very unsettled, almost to the point that she felt light-headed and dizzy. A snake wasn't supposed to be crawling around inside of a turtle shell, whether empty or not.

Inside the house, as she was cleaning one of the bathrooms, she suddenly realized why the sight had been so disturbing—the snake was basically occupying the turtle shell, as though possessing it. Since Sam had been very nearby, her thoughts naturally turned to him, as being a possibility for the one possessed.

But it can't be Sam because Beme is ever watching, she told herself. Peering out a bedroom window at Sam, she found herself wondering about this because she couldn't currently see or sense the firebird anywhere in the area. *Surely Beme must be somewhere nearby because he's always keeping an eye on Sam.*

A few moments later, Vini did catch sight of Beme, who was currently shrunk down to about the size of a tennis ball, hovering over the fountain; and the sight of the firebird reassured her that Sam was unlikely to be the one afflicted.

However, the sight of the snake inside the empty turtle shell continued to slip in and out of her thoughts for the rest of the day.

At home in the evening, though unsettled, Vini prayed for a very long time before going to bed, which helped to settle her mind at least on the fact that God was always looking out for her. *He will help me figure this out*, her brain said. *I simply have to trust that He will reveal things to me in His own good time.* Keeping in mind that she sometimes had trouble picking up on clues and messages, she firmly reminded herself, *I also need to pay close attention, to everything, so I don't miss something important.*

Vini had a lovely dream that night in which she was out on an excursion with Tulko, sailing around on a calm summer day as though she had not a care in the world. Ahead a short ways in the sky, she saw the Rain Dragon, though he was a little hard to see because it was somewhat cloudy.

Of course it's cloudy, her mind said, thinking herself rather silly, *because the dragon is breathing on the clouds to turn them into rain.*

The dragon was a beautiful blue color, like a dark version of the sky, or a pale version of a sapphire, and with a glowing shimmer all over that was somewhat like that of a jewel hovering in the soft sunshine of the heavens. But was her brain deciding that the Rain Dragon was blue, or was the real Rain Dragon blue? Vini couldn't decide. Within just a few seconds, she and Tulko lost sight of the dragon amidst several dense patches of clouds. However, a mere moment later Vini spotted a dove of nearly the same color as the dragon flying out of a puffy cloud shaped very much like a kangaroo. As Vini laughed at the sight, Tulko whinnied before turning to take her home.

As she awoke, Vini felt very peaceful, and no longer had the unsettled feeling in her stomach, though she reasoned this was likely more the result of prayer than from having a pleasant dream.

In looking forward to Professor Fulhausen coming to the mansion for tea, Vini had remembered something else from his lecture in the spring. At the same time he talked about dragons having good eyesight, he had also said something about firebirds helping to keep dragons in check. Thinking about the Rain Dragon dream and not wanting to miss anything important God might be trying to tell her, she wondered, *What if doves, probably magical ones, and not firebirds, are the ones who keep dragons in check.* Since nature was full of checks and balances, like the way populations of things such as insects and rodents were kept

in check by predators, and the way certain poisonous plants had beneficial purposes, she thought this might make sense. With doves being somewhat peaceful and calming, they might act as a counter to the dragons being so fiery and fierce.

However, while what she was pondering held a slight ring of truth, she knew that something was not quite right about this theory.

On Sunday afternoon, Vini came to the mansion not to work but to visit the libraries, so she would have plenty of uninterrupted time for research. It was never a problem for her to do this because Violet and Dave never minded.

In thinking about the professor's mention of the Star Dragon, Vini remembered that she had read something once connecting dragons to stars.

With a pile of books on the table in front of her, in two hours she found only what she had found before, a short paragraph stating that dragons while hovering high in the sky are camouflaged and often look like stars.

Disappointed that the book didn't have any more information, she thought, *I'll be so glad when Violet catalogs everything*. Vini was thinking about offering to help, if she could fit the project into her schedule of school, water polo, church, and work activities in the fall. In thinking about something teachers often said, about how two heads are better than one, especially in the area of getting things done more quickly and efficiently, Vini also reasoned that, in needing to handle so many books, four hands would be better than two.

Taking a short break to walk around the library and stretch her legs, Vini said a short prayer to ask God to help her find something else connecting dragons to stars.

Sitting down again, in a very old book (almost crumbling in fact) full of legends about trolls and ogres, she immediately found a mention of a dragon performing a special task for God that was somehow related to the stars. After the task, the dragon was named the Star Dragon; and the creature was now sleeping amongst the stars while awaiting further instructions from God.

In the hopes of finding more information about the Star Dragon, Vini studied the book carefully for nearly an hour, turning the pages

very gently so as not to damage them. Unfortunately, she found nothing more on the subject.

Giving up for the day, mainly because of a crick in her neck and a tenseness in her shoulders, she thought, *I'll just have to remember to ask Professor Fulhausen about the Star Dragon when he comes on Wednesday.*

The crick and tenseness both worked themselves out on her walk home, and Vini spent the rest of the afternoon kicking a soccer ball around with Preston in the back yard.

Chapter Five

Harvey's Ghost

Monday began the final week of Albert and Louetta's summer stay. Their parents would actually be picking them on Thursday, which was three days before Dave and Violet were set to return on Sunday.

Vini arrived at work to find Louetta and Albert both restless, basically feeling cooped up and craving adventure of some sort. Missing the excitement of the earlier part of her summer at camp, Vini too found herself feeling a little humdrum.

"I want to go somewhere," Louetta complained.

"I think I might ask Mr. Galloway if we can take a road trip someplace for a day," Albert said.

Since Violet's car had stayed behind when the couple took Dave's SUV to see Aunt Eugenia, it wouldn't be any problem for Albert to take them all on some sort of outing. He had already been running errands, like going to get bread and milk, and taking Sam to buy a couple of things from a local garden center. In addition to Vini going along on the excursion, Albert thought Ben or Sam, or both, might want to go. Ben was already hard at work in the garden. As many hours as he had put in lately on the estate, Albert felt sure he would welcome a day off.

"It would have to be tomorrow," Louetta said, "since the professor is coming for tea Wednesday." She had already been doing some baking for the teatime, in the form of scones and three kinds of cookies, which were currently stored in the freezer. What was left to do from her planned menu was a cake and two kinds of dainty sandwiches, both of which she was waiting until Wednesday morning to make.

"I think they call it wanderlust," Louetta said emphatically, in a poetic fashion, "when people feel the need to wander and explore."

Without waiting to hear the discussion of options as to where they all might wander for a day, Vini set off to dusting. One of the main things she wanted to get done was carry the wooden model ships outside to dust them with canned air. With all of their sails, rigging, and

other detailed and tiny bits, spraying the ships with air was really the best way to clean them. And doing the spraying outside kept the rest of the house much cleaner. After carefully carrying the HMS Victory onto a balcony and giving it a good spray, she returned it to its spot on the fireplace mantle in the master bedroom.

Next, retrieving a ship called Harvey's Ghost from the top of a bookshelf in the parlor, Vini carried it out onto the back porch. A Boston Clipper ship, Harvey's Ghost was one of twelve model ships Mrs. Doyle had inherited from her father who loved to build them. Two of the twelve models had been donated to a museum several years back, but ten still remained in the mansion. This particular ship had been left to Albert after Mrs. Doyle's death, but he hadn't yet taken it home with him. Since he would be off to a small college dorm room soon, and already had a cluttered home bedroom, he felt it best to leave the ship in the mansion for the time being.

Since Mrs. Doyle had watched her father build many of the ship models over the years (mainly when she was Frances Harrison, as she was before marrying Gerard Doyle when they were both twenty-four), she naturally thought he had built Harvey's Ghost. But as Vini, Albert, Louetta, and Ben were about to discover, this was not the case.

Vini had always thought there was something quite unique about this particular model. Though all of the wooden ships were extremely intricate and well made, Harvey's Ghost somehow looked different. In close examination, it actually looked more weather-beaten than all of the others, as though it might actually have been exposed to sun and wind and water for many years. Indeed, the cracking, fading, and other weathering effects on all of the bits of wood seemed to look more like those on a real ship, as if it might truly have been floating in a harbor or sailing harsh seas for most of its life. The sails too looked quite real and worn, and were of a different type of material than those on any of the other ship models. The whole ship basically had a very aged look about it that the others lacked.

In the daylight on the back porch, Vini admired the details of the ship. Though it was slightly smaller and had less masts than most of the others in the house, it did have four gun ports on each side, with eight cannons. Though not anywhere near as well armed as the HMS Victory, which had over a hundred gun ports, Vini could imagine the

little Boston Clipper still safely carrying passengers and cargo to and from many exotic destinations.

Smiling as she studied the single lifeboat hanging in the rear of the ship, while gingerly picking up one of the tiny oars, she thought, *I wouldn't want to have to be in anything like this in rough seas.*

After dusting the ship, she continued to admire all of the little bits and pieces such as the anchors, barrels, buckets, and the covered stair hatch, the hinges of which looked incredibly real. Her gaze moving to one of the racks specially built to hold the ship's cannonballs, she noticed something slightly odd. Amongst the forty or so cannonballs, the rack held another round object, slightly larger than any of the cannonballs, which made it about the size of a small pearl. And the object did indeed resemble a pearl, except that Vini had never seen a pearl like it before, dark blue and iridescent, with hints of other colors swirled and sparkling in its depths. *There are black pearls, but I don't think there are dark blue ones.* But perhaps it was a fancy bead, because it suddenly reminded her of some she had seen worked into the jewelry at the Renaissance Fair.

As she found her fingers reaching for the bead or pearl or whatever, she suddenly pulled her hand back because something in her gut was telling her not to touch it.

But it was so pretty, she really wanted to look at it more closely, and hold it in her hand. And a thought suddenly came into her head. *It can't hurt to touch it, to pick it up.*

Again resisting the urge, she imagined that it might truly be a gem, perhaps a fabulous pearl, unlike any others in the world. Since this was Albert's ship, she could ask him if she could have it. It couldn't hurt to ask. Then, maybe she could have it set into a ring. Since it looked a lot like a pearl, she felt it would be perfect in a ring, and unique, so strikingly dark blue.

Like a midnight sky, Vini thought. And with the other fiery colors in it—mainly of gold and red hues, reminding her of those one might see in an opal—she thought it might well be a midnight sky full of stars and nebulas, or perhaps dragons.

Her head full of starry thoughts, she did finally slowly reach out to touch the object, at the exact moment that Albert and Louetta were coming out onto the back porch with a pitcher of raspberry lemonade

and a tray of glasses, and also at the same time that Ben, taking a break from trimming trees, began climbing the porch steps.

At the exact moment Vini's fingers touched the round blue object, Louetta and Albert had just set the tray and pitcher onto the porch table, and Ben had reached the top step; at which point, all four of them found themselves no longer on the porch, but on the deck of a sailing ship, the ship being none other than Harvey's Ghost, now life-size, fully real, and sailing in choppy ocean waters.

Having had something similar happen to them once before, it didn't take the four long to realize they had just been lured into a Demon Pocket. Actually, Vini had been lured, while the others had been sucked into it with her because they had been in such close proximity when she touched the object, a cursed object, in fact, and one cursed to do exactly this, draw human beings into a place where waiting demons could attack and kill them.

In doing some research after the first time this happened, Vini had discovered a great debate amongst scholars as to whether or not Demon Pockets were real places in other realms or if they were simply in human minds, perhaps hidden in the unused parts of the brains of those who became trapped in them. For all of the people who had ever been caught in them, and survived to write about their experiences, no one had ever truly figured this out. Whatever the truth, it was well known that if a person died inside a Demon Pocket, he or she would die for real, whether the experience was simply all in the mind or not. The lure into these places was mainly in the form of thoughts planted by demons into human minds. However, Vini's research had revealed that cursed objects, acting like powerful magnets, could also draw people into these horror-filled places.

While being on the deck of a sailing ship in somewhat choppy waters might not be considered a horror, what was about to follow certainly would qualify as pretty scary, as well as dangerous to the point of possible death.

As the waves rose higher, tossing the ship and the startled sea travelers, storm clouds gathering in the skies above began spitting rain, which soon became steady.

The rocking of the ship made Ben and Vini seasick right away. Louetta and Albert, though not usually prone to this, also soon became

queasy. The wind picked up next, whipping about them as if almost alive.

The storm actually didn't surprise Vini, since demons were easily able to raise storms, this being something she had discovered from previous experience. Very quickly drenched by the rain, as well as slipping around on the wet deck, she managed to procure a spyglass from a bin containing buckets, rags, and other useful nautical whatnots. In using the glass to scan the area surrounding the ship, even in the looming darkness, she was able to see not only a craggy shoreline, but nearly a dozen demons hovering above the cliffs, with several more perched on rocks along the cliff edges.

The ship, at present, was a good ways from the shore. With the demons keeping their distance, Vini guessed that this was because a cross was hung on a railing in the ship's stern. She had noticed the cross right away because, although it was fairly simple and small, made of olive wood and not quite eight inches high, it was very beautiful, and a welcome sight in the midst of their dire circumstances.

The assumption that the demons were being kept at bay by the cross was correct because no being of evil could get too close to a cross without suffering some type of painful consequences. In the case of demons, the dreaded object burned their eyes. And if they were to ever touch a cross, it generally meant death. Also, anytime they neared a cross, they could hear angels singing. Though at a pitch most human ears were unable to detect, the sound was excruciatingly painful to demons' ears.

Despite having to keep some distance from the cross, the demons were hoping that the storm would drive the ship onto the large rocks near the shore, where the creatures planned to set upon the travelers in the water, if the human vermin weren't already drowned or dashed to pieces by the wreck of the ship.

Although Albert had long been fascinated with sailing ships and had made some study of them, right now, as panicked as he was, he couldn't currently tell starboard from port, let alone a mizzenmast from a jibboom. This being the case, in this desperate situation, with the others looking to him to take the lead, he had to admit he knew more about model ships than about actual ships. But since he and Louetta had been sailing a few times, they were possibly not quite as panicked as Ben and

Vini, who had never been on a ship in their whole lives. Albert was at least not so panicked that he couldn't think, and his first idea was that they should drop the sails and ride the storm out.

"Ships like this are designed to handle a storm!" he shouted above the wind and pelting rain. "But we should lower the sails so they don't rock us even more!"

As far as lowering sails, of the ten Harvey's Ghost possessed, only three needed to be taken down, the others being already so. But, of course, sailing ships need an experienced crew; so even with Albert and Ben using all of their muscles, wrestling with the sails was difficult, especially with the lurching of the ship. However, with the girls helping, they were able to accomplish the task in about ten minutes.

Strangely enough, even with being in danger, it didn't occur to Vini to call a unicorn, probably because subconsciously she knew it wouldn't help much in this situation. While the light of the creature might well kill the demons, the unicorn wouldn't have been able to calm the storm like wind horses and thunderbirds might be able to. Unfortunately, being in a different realm (whether in an actual physical place or deep inside their own brains), neither Tulko nor Lydu would be able to hear or sense the calls and distress of those trapped in the Demon Pocket.

Even though she was still sick to her stomach, now in less panic, Vini found her brain working slightly better, and she suddenly thought of the object that had pulled them in. The blue pearl, or whatever, was still on the ship, though it was now larger than the cannonballs because it had kept its proportion when everything on the ship grew to life-size.

Though she was somewhat afraid to touch the mysterious sphere, she thought it would be a good idea to toss it into the sea to get rid of it, since she was sure that it was what had drawn them in. Getting rid of it seemed a good idea.

Approaching the cannonball rack, for a brief moment, she didn't want to throw the object into the sea. Even in the darkened surroundings the sphere was beautiful, very much like a gigantic glistening pearl, or some other fabulous smooth gem.

While trying to talk herself out of discarding the sphere, she realized that it was probably a demon telling her not to toss it. *It's too lovely to get rid of.* She was correct, as one of the nasty hovering

creatures had drifted closer to the position of the boat in order to plant this thought.

Shaking off the thought, she grabbed the object, which was warm to the touch and very heavy. Fortunately, Ben, nearby, understood what she was trying to do and came to help her; and together they hoisted the blue sphere over the side of the ship where it instantly sank beneath the surface of the frothy water.

Unfortunately, as far as they could tell, nothing positive happened as a result of throwing the blue pearl overboard. Vini had entertained the hope that the action might somehow transport them back to the mansion's back porch, where they could have their raspberry lemonade as planned.

Though completely soaked through and feeling very chilly from the wetness and wind, they were wise enough not to seek shelter below deck because they needed to be able to see what was going on around them.

While still in fear and panic, Vini silently prayed. *Dear Lord, please help us. Help us figure out what to do.*

The moment she said the prayer, a bible quote popped into her brain, part of Isaiah 43:1-2. "Fear not, for I have redeemed you.... When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you...."

Unfortunately, at the same moment the quote entered her head, she also threw up from seasickness. While she was possibly less fearful in having the comfort of God's reassurance, Vini basically still felt cold, nauseas, and distracted, just like her friends.

In the crashing waves, the ship was moving closer to the rocks, and the four impromptu sailors soon realized that if Harvey's Ghost stayed on its current path, they were going to end up smashed. In a reversal of his previous thinking, Albert briefly entertained the idea of raising the sails, to see if they could manage to sail clear of the danger. However, he wasn't at all sure they would be able to control the ship. Plus, since it had taken so long to wrangle with just three of the sails, it didn't seem as though they would have enough time to raise them, let alone figure out how to use them effectively.

Although demons had much smaller brains than human beings, the evil creatures had also been doing some thinking and had come up with

an idea. Since they couldn't get too near the ship because of the cross, they would rouse a sea creature to help them, this being a kraken, sleeping on the bottom of the ocean floor several miles out from shore.

And it didn't take long for the demons to do this.

Having needed her hands free to wrestle with the sails, Vini had earlier placed the spyglass back into the bin. But she wouldn't need it to see what was heading their way; none of them would because the swell of water as the creature surfaced was very noticeable, even in the storm-riddled sea. The monster was terrifically huge, and fearsome, which they could see very clearly, even under the darkened skies, their eyes having long since adjusted to the low light.

Of course, having never seen a kraken, the occupants of the ship at first didn't know what it was. In being able to see several enormous writhing tentacles, they quickly ruled out the idea of a monster sea serpent. It was also clearly something much more than a giant squid, because its mouth held huge teeth, like something a gargantuan shark might possess. However, its head actually looked more like it might have belonged to a gigantic lizard.

While the creature was largely the color of the darkened seas, there was no mistaking the terrifying form of it as it swiftly drew ever closer to the ship.

Albert was the one who correctly hit on it, and in a shaking voice said, "I think it's a kraken."

"Do they really exist?" Ben asked, in an equally unsteady voice.

Close to tears, Louetta said, "Leviathans are mentioned in the bible, so there are probably other gigantic sea creatures too, like krakens." Breaking into tears a moment later, she added, "Dear God, if this is just a bad dream, please let us wake up!"

The demons' intent behind rousing the kraken was to have the monster tip the ship. In getting the humans into the water, they would be able to kill them more easily, unless they were already drowned or possibly eaten by the beast, either of which would also suit the demons just fine.

Even if the demons couldn't get the kraken to tip the ship, the wake from the rising of the creature and its approach was aiding in pushing Harvey's Ghost closer to shore, which would soon have the effect of a crash on the rocks.

Though fearful, because they were being more swiftly drawn toward the shore, Vini's brain was still working and she asked, "Can we use the cannons to fight it?"

As it turns out, they weren't going to need to fight because help was actually on the way. With Ben, Albert, and Vini scrambling with cannonballs and trying to figure out how they were going to light the guns, Louetta was the one who noticed a narrow crack of light appearing briefly in the skies above the kraken. The crack only needed to be narrow and brief to allow the halcyon to enter the Demon Pocket where it immediately took up a hovering position above Harvey's Ghost.

Ben, Vini, and Albert, busy with their cannon efforts, didn't immediately notice the bird; however, they couldn't help but notice the storm surrounding them vanishing in mere seconds. Though the skies remained overcast, the whole area became completely still. The calm was quickly followed by an about-face of the kraken. After swimming out to a spot very close to where he had been resting previously, the creature simply sank majestically to the ocean floor to again fall into a deep sleep.

With Louetta pointing, the others finally noticed the bird, which reminded Vini of pictures she had seen of terns; but the halcyon was larger than most terns, with slightly longer tail and wing feathers which made the creature look very wispy and fairylike, almost as though it belonged in a dream, and not in real life. Its movements too were almost surreal, as though hovering in slightly slow motion. The bird also held a soft glow which was especially noticeable in the dim light.

Connecting the bird with Professor Fulhausen's recent lecture, Vini was the one who guessed this was a halcyon. However, Albert was the only one to hear the creature's name, Sima, by a thought laid onto his brain. This was, of course, how many magical creatures were able to communicate, telepathically; and Sima had specifically wanted Albert to know her name.

Angry to have their plans thwarted, the demons threw large rocks at both the bird and the ship, which suddenly began to move, seemingly on its own, as though caught in a powerful unseen current that carried them swiftly away from the danger of the shore. In less than a minute,

Harvey's Ghost ended up far out of reach of the demons and very near where the kraken had submerged.

In this position, the ship veered slightly from a wake of waves left from when the kraken had lowered itself into the sea.

Seeing a faint glowing light ahead of them, fairly low on the horizon, like a single dim headlight visible some distance away on a foggy night, the sea travelers somehow knew they needed to head towards the light (probably because they remembered that they had been saved from the first Demon Pocket by a light, which had turned out to be Jelzey).

However, while something was still moving the ship, presumably the halcyon still hovering over them, with the veer of the vessel, they were now slightly off course, and heading to the left of the light, not straight for it. While Sima could calm storms and control seas and sea currents, she couldn't sail a ship; this would have to be left to the human beings. But she would of course stay with them while they figured things out and until they were able to exit the Demon Pocket.

Not being in immediate danger, the four on the ship didn't panic. Nor did they see the lone demon hovering low nearby, the only one brave enough to approach the ship. Actually, he wasn't all that brave, just reckless in his anger at having lost the prey. But it wasn't the cross on the railing that would do away with him; rather, with a single leap, a dolphin knocked him out of the air and into the water, where he sank beneath the waves rather quickly, much like a stone, only to land rather hard on the head of the kraken. With the knock to the head, again fully waked, and very sour at having had his slumber disturbed twice in one day, the monster devoured the demon, before once more falling asleep.

Though he knew they needed to steer the ship towards the light, Albert could find no steering wheel on the deck of the ship. Not only that, there was no wheel house in which a steering wheel might be concealed. "Where is it?" he cried, somewhat frustrated.

"What about that," Vini said, pointing to a fairly good-sized cabinet in the stern of the ship.

"No," Albert replied, "that's just for storing maps and charts."

"Maybe the wheel is below deck," Louetta suggested.

Albert was trying to think. After a short consideration, he said, "There might be one below, because some ships have two steering

wheels, one below in case the topside one gets shot off or damaged in a battle.” However, he knew they didn’t really have time to search below deck. They were very near the ship’s rudder. On an impulse, he grabbed it and tried to steer. The rudder did indeed turn the tiller, which turned the ship, quite easily, leading Albert to believe that the ship probably didn’t have a steering wheel. “It must be a small enough ship that it’s steered just by rudder and not by a wheel,” he said in relief.

With the halcyon still hovering above them, Albert proceeded to guide the ship directly towards the softly-glowing light, which grew ever larger as they approached and which they reached in less than three minutes, the light basically swallowing up both the ship and its impromptu crew the moment it touched the foremast of Harvey’s Ghost.

All four passengers ended up sitting on the ground in the grassy area between the fountain and the back porch of Doyle Mansion, soaking wet from their adventure. Harvey’s Ghost was floating in the base pool of the fountain, and was also soaking wet, as though it had truly just endured the whole ordeal with them.

Seeing a glint of light in the sky over the mansion, which was the halcyon departing, Albert said a silent, *Thank you*, to Sima for saving them.

The group remained sitting in the grass for several minutes to catch their breath.

Albert rose first to retrieve the ship from the fountain and carry it up to the back porch, where he placed it on a low table to dry. So that they all might dry off, Louetta briefly went inside to retrieve towels for them, which they used before sitting down together at the table to further calm down.

Although naturally shook up, they blessedly had no physical injuries, which had not been the case during their first Demon Pocket experience when they suffered cuts and bruises.

After the first time they had been caught in a Demon Pocket, they had had Mrs. Doyle to discuss things with. Now, with Violet and Dave gone, they would have only themselves. They were pretty sure Mr. Galloway didn’t know about things like Demon Pockets. And even if he did, since they were all currently safe, they weren’t planning to tell him anything about their adventure.

Thinking that a couple of hours at least must have passed, they were surprised that the ice in the lemonade pitcher had barely started to melt.

Running inside again for a few minutes, Louetta brought out a plate of crackers and slices of cheese for them as a snack, not only to fortify them, but also to settle what remained of their queasiness.

One of the first things they realized was that they were the exact same four people, of their circle of friends, who were caught in both Demon Pockets.

“So are we just more susceptible to being drawn into Demon Pockets than say, Charlie or Sam or Preston?” Ben wondered.

Answering slowly, as she considered the question, Vini said, “No...I don’t think so. I think this was just a planned attack and that we all happened to be here. If any others had been here, they likely would have been pulled in too.”

“It’s a real ship, somehow shrunk down, and not just a model,” Albert said, eyeing Harvey’s Ghost. “It wouldn’t have stayed afloat if it had been just a model that got changed in size; and it wouldn’t have even floated in the fountain if it was just a model.”

“But were we really on *that* ship,” Louetta speculated.

“I think we were,” Vini responded, getting up to kneel down and carefully examine Harvey’s Ghost. “It’s not just that it’s all wet. I remember these exact buckets and barrels. And there’s the little spyglass,” she added, pointing, as Louetta joined her in peering closely at the ship.

“I see,” Louetta replied, nodding.

“But there’s still the possibility that it was all in our minds,” Ben said.

“Maybe,” Vini said. “But then how do we explain the ship being all wet?”

“It might have been in the fountain the whole time,” Albert replied, “and our brains just manufactured everything else.”

“But it smells like sea water,” Louetta countered, “not just water from the fountain.”

“I don’t think we can rule anything out,” Vini said, “and we may never know the exact truth. Even experts in Demon Pockets don’t agree and don’t have it all figured out. It’s just mainly speculation.”

Whether or not the secrets behind Demon Pockets could ever be figured out, Mrs. Doyle's father, Patrick Harrison, who hadn't built Harvey's Ghost, but rather purchased it, knew many of its secrets, including the fact that it was indeed a real ship that had been magically miniaturized. Mr. Harrison had been a maritime historian, writer, and lecturer. On one of his many travels for research, he had acquired Harvey's Ghost from an old sailor who had once had an adventure aboard the ship very similar to the one Vini and her friends had just experienced, the telling of which is perhaps better left for another time.

In continuing their discussion while snacking and sipping lemonade, the four were astounded to discover that the halcyon had appeared to each of them as a different color.

"It was blue," Louetta insisted, "like a pale sky, or maybe the waters of a shallow sea."

"I thought it was gray, like a storm cloud or a hunk of slate," Vini said. "The light was dim, but it definitely looked gray."

"Whether or not the light was dim, the bird was glowing," Ben chimed in, "and it was an earthy green color, like moss or algae."

With Vini, Ben, and Louetta looking to him for a comment as to what he had observed, Albert declined to reply, shrugging nonchalantly and reaching for another cracker in an effort to divert attention elsewhere. For some reason, he didn't want to tell the others that Sima had appeared to him to be a soft white color, like maybe the foam of certain sea waves caught in the sun and glinting, almost as sunshine might glint off of an old and slightly-tarnished silver teapot, or a sheet of cream-colored satin. He also wasn't quite ready to tell them that he knew the halcyon's name. *Maybe later*, he thought.

Whatever the true color of the creature, they were all as awed of the halcyon settling the kraken as they were of the bird calming the storm.

In speculating if the mysterious light they had seen might have been a unicorn, Vini didn't think so. Not only had she not called one, she didn't think the light looked like that of a unicorn. The group would never come to know that the light was actually from a mermaid acting as a beacon to call them to the exit of the Demon Pocket. Nor would they ever learn that some of the light and power of mermaids was actually channeled from the stars.

In thinking later, Vini would wonder if a unicorn could even be called into a Demon Pocket. With it being a place of such powerful evil, she didn't know. She came to the conclusion that a unicorn, being so powerful, probably could enter such a place. However, since she still felt a need to be careful about summoning them, she was glad that she hadn't done so. Plus, help had arrived, naturally, since God always provides help for His children.

Whether or not a unicorn could be called into a Demon Pocket, the halcyon had chosen to enter. Alerted by a mermaid as to the fact that several humans were in danger, the bird hadn't hesitated to enter. Quickly finding a point of entry in a magical waterspout, she dove in quickly. With magical speed close to that of a wind horse, Sima reached the Demon Pocket, and Harvey's Ghost within it, in a mere split second.

Ordinarily, calming storms was relatively easy for the halcyon; after all, this was what she was created for. However, taking on a storm in a Demon Pocket had been quite a challenge. But overall, Sima liked the challenge. And she was definitely meant to do this because she had been specifically assigned by God to protect the human known as Albert Nolan. She had once saved him as a boy, though he hadn't known it, on one of those really big lakes called the Great Lakes, when his family was on vacation. The lake was, of course, not so big for the halcyon. But Sima wasn't just assigned to Albert because of the lake experience and what had just happened in the Demon Pocket. With Albert destined to join the Navy after college, Sima would need to protect him later in life as well.

As far as calming the kraken, the beast had only woken up and gotten worked up because a demon had placed a craggy rock under one of the kraken's scales, then kicked the rock to wake up and irritate the monster. But Sima knew of this, and had told a dolphin to knock the rock out of the scale, which served to settle the creature. Then the halcyon told him to go back to sleep, which the kraken gladly did.

Startling the others at the table, as she choked and coughed on a gulp of lemonade, Louetta suddenly cried out, "Oh golly, I just had a horrible thought! What if there were people inside Harvey's Ghost when it got shrunk down?"

While the boys rose to examine the ship, Vini was afraid to look.

“You can’t really see anything below deck,” Albert said, opening one of the hatches to look in, and also peering into the ventilation grates. “And I wouldn’t want to take it apart to find out if there are any bones in there.”

“Surely not,” Ben said. “Whatever happened, however it happened, there surely weren’t people in there.”

They were all, of course, very hopeful that this was the case.

“Even if there were people in there,” Albert added, “they would have been shrunk down with the ship and would have been just fine; tiny, of course, but likely just fine.”

“Plus, as long ago as it probably happened,” Ben said, “we wouldn’t be able to do anything about it.”

“True,” Louetta said, taking a deep breath and silently praying to God that no one had been shrunk down along with the ship.

Nibbling on a piece of cheese, Albert suddenly remembered something. “I’ll be right back,” he said, rising to retrieve a book from the upstairs library, one that he had loved looking through as a kid, on sailing ships and the mysteries surrounding some of them.

Sure enough, the book did have a picture of the real Harvey’s Ghost, which looked identical to the one currently drying on the back porch. Though the ship was built in Boston in 1857, the photograph was taken in 1949. The picture was accompanied by an old news article stating that Harvey’s Ghost was presumed either shipwrecked or lost in the Bermuda Triangle, its last voyage having passed very close to that mysterious region of the Atlantic Ocean.

“I wonder if that’s maybe where we were,” Ben speculated, “the Bermuda Triangle.”

The others agreed that it was a possibility.

Vini had been thinking about something that she didn’t end up sharing with her friends, something that was related to being susceptible to being drawn into a Demon Pocket. The first time they had been caught in one, she reasoned that it had been related to sin; and her reasoning had been correct. This time, she felt sin had also played a part in being susceptible to the lure. For starters, she (along with Louetta and Albert) had been craving adventure, when she probably should have been satisfied with her life simply as it was. Having already had a fabulous summer adventure at camp, she shouldn’t have

desired yet another so soon after coming home. While there was nothing wrong with wanting to have fun, Vini definitely felt she should have been satisfied and not constantly craving more, especially since she knew that excess of any kind was a sin.

However, while the wanderlust may have played a part, Vini was feeling guiltier about something she felt was much worse than the craving of adventure and thrills, namely, the issue of coveting. She had admired and desired the shiny object, the blue pearl; in fact, she had wanted it, almost badly. She had been focused on something worldly, in this case jewelry, and not on God. And again, she had wanted more, instead of being thankful for and satisfied with what she already had. As Vini had surmised before, sin of some sort was often a factor when getting drawn into a Demon Pocket.

Saying a quick silent prayer to ask God for forgiveness of her sins, Vini was drawn out of her thoughts by Ben asking, “How did something the size of Harvey’s Ghost get shrunk down?”

Louetta had been pondering the same thing, and she almost wondered if it was something like the type of magic Pizzo was capable of, in bringing things like paintings and sculptures to life. But while sailing ships were very much considered to be artistic creations, puck troll magic never changed the sizes of anything, so she knew this couldn’t be right.

“Maybe something in the Bermuda Triangle made it change sizes,” Albert speculated.

“Maybe Satan or one of his fellow fallen angels has that kind of power,” Ben suggested.

While this was all very interesting, Vini more found herself wondering if the blue pearl had been on the ship before it was shrunk down, or if it had been placed there after. As Louetta and Albert went inside to change clothes, and as Ben said goodbye and set off on his bicycle for home, Vini again looked at the ship, feeling there was probably much more mystery surrounding it than what they had already discovered or even pondered.

From a rack holding three buckets, she carefully picked up the tiny buckets to drain drops of water out of them.

In looking closely, she noticed that one of the buckets still held something like dried-up pitch. At least, it looked like pitch, for as dark

as it was; and there was even a tiny brush stuck fast in it. With the sun slanting onto the porch, she was able to see these small details that she might not have noticed otherwise. Gazing into the tiny bucket, she was suddenly reminded of something; but she couldn't quite think of what. It was something in the back of her brain that she had seen before; but she couldn't, at the moment, put her finger on it.

While she couldn't quite think of what the bucket of pitch reminded her of, Vini did remember that she wanted to ask Pizzo about his drawings. After a brief stop in the kitchen, she found him in the music room, having a nap behind the green velvet throw pillow on the divan.

Much like the kraken, being wakened from a nap made Pizzo very cranky; and hopping up to the lamp table beside the couch, he threw first a ball of yarn at her that had been sitting on the table, then a roll of tape.

Fortunately, Vini had thought ahead and prepared for this. After dodging the yarn and catching the tape, she hurriedly approached the little troll and offered him two cookies on a napkin from the batches in the freezer that Louetta had made for the upcoming teatime.

As Pizzo eagerly reached for the cookies, Vini placed them just out of reach on the lamp table while telling him, "They need about five minutes to defrost; then you can have them."

This seemed to both satisfy and settle the little troll who sat on the edge of the table while keeping an eye on the clock because he not only knew how to tell time, he knew exactly how long five minutes was.

"I was wondering about your drawings, Pizzo," Vini began, sitting down on the divan. "As far as the dragon and rainbow, where did you get the ideas? And the peacock and snake; what made you pick those things to draw?"

Eyeing the cookies as well as the clock, Pizzo simply shrugged and pointed at one of the windows, the one nearest Louetta's easel. In standing up and gazing out of the window in question, which looked out onto a large section of the back gardens, Vini couldn't see anything in particular.

"So you saw all of those things out of that window?" she questioned.

Shrugging again, Pizzo decided he had waited long enough, though barely three minutes had passed. Grabbing the cookies, he halfway

smiled, in a mischievous sort of way, as he expertly slid down one leg of the lamp table and scampered off with his treats.

A short while later, in returning Harvey's Ghost to the top of the bookshelf in the parlor, because she felt it was dry enough to do so, Vini began wondering about other special and magical ships of the world; and for some reason, she thought of Noah's Ark. Suddenly getting it into her head that she wanted to look at Pizzo's drawings again, Vini returned to the music room where she found them in one of Louetta's portfolios. In addition to the sketches of the dragon, enormouse, and peacock, she found one featuring a long line of animals traveling together in twos.

Something else related to Noah's Ark, she thought. *How odd.* And at that moment, she suddenly remembered what she couldn't quite put her finger on before, about the bucket of pitch. It actually reminded her of the heavy wooden box she had found in the spring, the one containing the special bible that had led her to the first unicorn she had called. The bucket of pitch reminded her of the box because the inside of the box was extremely dark, as though it might be coated with something like the pitch used to make sailing ships watertight. The final two of Pizzo's drawings featured a vase of flowers and Boomer chasing a ball.

When leaving for home an hour later, in meandering through the part of the garden Pizzo had indicated, Vini didn't notice anything in particular, other than a small dove, of pretty greenish hues, perched in a tree. As she passed, the dove cooed softly to her.

Since she was still a little wet when she arrived home, Vini answered her mother's question about the wetness with, "Oh, it was so hot, we all decided to play in the hoses and fountain for a while."

As she entered her bedroom, Vini's eyes met a wooden cross hung on the wall above her bed. It was one Violet had given to her, also made of olive wood like the cross on Harvey's Ghost, which she was extremely thankful for because she truly believed it was what had kept the demons at a distance.

In truth, the cross on the ship was not on Harvey's Ghost originally, but had been placed there recently, by none other than Pizzo who—only the Friday before, while Louetta was gone to the lecture with Vini, on a whim, one of his sudden good ideas—had taken the tiny olive-wood

cross from a glass cabinet containing miniatures on the mansion's third floor and had hung it on the railing of the ship.

While human beings knew that God's ways were often mysterious and that He often spoke to them in mysterious ways, puck trolls didn't particularly know this. But Pizzo always paid attention to his good ideas, whether or not they made much sense, because they always just felt right to him.

Chapter Six

A Fancy and Fabled Teatime

Preston had been invited to the Wednesday tea with Professor Fulhausen, scheduled for two in the afternoon, but didn't want to come because he was spending the day in his friend's treehouse, reading and trading comics, and playing some kind of board game.

Vini came early to help bake the cake, make the sandwiches, and spiff up the parlor where the fancy teatime was to be held.

As she arrived at the mansion, she chanced to see a somewhat odd-looking squirrel, very dark and very large for a squirrel, tucked inside a hollow log very near the rear gate of the estate.

Sam was nearby as Vini snuck closer to the log to take a look. He had come early to work too, so that he might be done before the teatime, which he was looking forward to.

"It's a rock squirrel," Sam said, in a hushed tone, in order not to frighten the squirrel, who was gnawing on something in his paws held out in front of him. "They mostly live among rocks and sometimes make their homes inside fallen logs."

"I've never seen one before," Vini said, also quietly, marveling at the creature that looked just about as big and fat as a large prairie dog.

"Since they don't hang out in trees like other squirrels," Sam said, "and are mostly tucked away inside rocks and logs, we tend not to see them much."

As she continued to watch, Vini was reminded of the snake inside the turtle shell. For some reason, she also remembered the fish eating the smaller fish. With both of these things in her mind, she suddenly became very uneasy, even to the point of feeling queasy.

Wanting a tool from the shed, Sam walked partway up to the house with Vini. Though he had been little distant and introspective lately, today he seemed more like his old self, at least smiling and a little more talkative than he had been in recent months. "I'm glad you guys came through that ship thing okay," he said. (Ben had, of course, told his

brother everything about the experience on Harvey's Ghost.) "I can't believe I missed both times of being trapped in a Demon Pocket," he added. "God must think Ben is better at handling those kinds of things than I am."

"Maybe," Vini agreed, "but it's good you know about them in case you ever become trapped yourself."

"I'm really looking forward to the professor's visit," Sam went on. "Since Ben got to go to the lecture at your church, now it's my turn for fun. We still can't be anywhere in double yet, at least not outside our close circle of friends. But we'll fix all of that this fall. We're waiting because the timing will be better with our uncle's work schedule. Summers are always super busy for him, with a lot of traveling. Anyway, I'm glad I got the tea party rather than the lecture, because of the treats."

"Speaking of which," Vini replied, "I'd better get up to the house to help Louetta with the food."

With Sam's words of "close circle of friends" ringing in her ears, as she made her way up to the back porch, Vini suddenly thought of her dream with the circle of people surrounding her. Looking back at Sam, and again thinking of the snake in the turtle shell, she again felt uneasy.

But it can't be either of the twins, she reminded herself, because the firebirds are always keeping watch. Indeed, though she couldn't see Beme, she could feel his presence somewhere nearby.

First thing in the kitchen, Louetta made sure to take the cookies out of the freezer to defrost. She had already staged a lot of the ingredients, bowls, and utensils they would need for making the cake, frosting, and two kinds of sandwiches.

After cooking and baking most of the morning, Vini gave the parlor a good cleaning to make sure it was fully presentable for the party. She also rearranged tables and chairs to accommodate both the food and the guests most comfortably.

Albert was doing a little extra cleaning in various other parts of the mansion because, when Louetta called to confirm his visit, the professor had expressed an interest in taking a tour while at the house.

Since they were saving room for their tea goodies, they all had simply an apple and a couple of pieces of cheese for lunch; after which, they rested a bit from their busy morning. Sam had brought a change of

clothes and was getting cleaned up and changed to get ready for the party.

About thirty minutes before the professor was to arrive, going to the kitchen to help Louetta with carrying trays and platters to the parlor, Vini found Pizzo also having cheese and an apple, since he was going to have to wait until after the tea for the leftovers, which he hoped would be plentiful.

“I’m sure there’ll be plenty of cake for you, Pizzo,” Louetta told him. “And I’ve already kept back two sandwiches and six cookies. But I want you to wait to have them, because the cheese and apple are enough for now. You shouldn’t eat so much at one time. It can’t be good for you.”

With the promise of cake and other treats later, Pizzo seemed satisfied to wait. Giving Louetta a big grin, he wolfed down his last piece of cheese before setting off for the parlor, where he intended to be present for the professor’s visit, but hidden, of course, in a special spot on one of the bookshelves, inside a basket, where he often liked to hide in that particular room.

The professor arrived promptly at two and was taken on his tour first thing; after which, the group settled in the parlor to enjoy the teatime.

Since this was a casual get-together and not a lecture, while sipping tea and enjoying the food, Professor Fulhausen spoke to them informally about various things, but mostly about magical creatures, since he was well aware this was why he was often invited to parties.

When Louetta mentioned how much she liked the story of the Rain Dragon, the professor said, “The Rain Dragon is only one of many dragons that either have performed or are destined to perform special tasks for God. God, of course, doesn’t need help, but He sometimes chooses to set certain tasks to others. Plus, He expects all of His creations to work. Even to begin with, Adam and Eve had work. They were to care for the garden. As far as the dragons, the rest of them are currently sleeping somewhere, hidden, waiting to be called into action. Some scholars believe dragons will help remake the earth in some wondrous way in the future, probably in fire.”

“In the Endtimes,” Vini said, “the earth will be destroyed by fire before being remade.”

“Well, there you go,” the professor replied.

Since they were currently on his favorite subject, dragons, Professor Fulhausen enthusiastically continued. “Most dragon scholars believe the creatures were originally good, but were corrupted by Satan, in a manner similar to the way he corrupted a lot of other animals like man, and lions, who weren’t supposed to be vicious and man-eating originally. Some dragons that didn’t go along with being corrupted were tortured and forced to serve him anyway.”

With his audience thoroughly engrossed, the professor went on to say that most dragons were healers—a gift bestowed upon them by God to help combat some of the world’s most horrible diseases created by Satan—but the exact nature of their healing powers was a mystery, not only as far as their methods, but also as to who might receive the benefits of their healing. “They were originally called sky serpents,” Professor Fulhausen added, “when they were widely considered to be good creatures and working for good. The name probably changed so as not to associate them with Satan, who is often likened to a serpent. Of course, he’s likened to a dragon too, but not as often. But just as most serpents aren’t really bad, most dragons aren’t either. And many people believe that if we could find them in the here and now, wherever they are hiding, they might be able to help us solve some of our worst problems.”

The professor’s mention of “man-eating” with regard to lions made Vini think of what dragons might feed on, which was probably the same thing that other magical creatures needed to nourish them. With the goodness of humankind in short supply, this would mean that there was not enough food right now for dragons to be plentiful. Even if some dragons were evil, since they were originally supposed to be on the side of good, they probably still needed goodness to eat, which wasn’t as available as the evilness that creatures like demons fed on.

While they were talking about dragons, Vini remembered to ask about the Star Dragon. “I tried to do some research on this, but I couldn’t find anything.”

Smiling, the professor answered, “The tale is similar to the story of the Rain Dragon, but the Star Dragon’s task was to act as the Star of Bethlehem. This was a golden dragon, very bright, like a sun; and he just hung in the sky, all lit up and spectacular for all to see. Dragons

can hold position pretty well in flight if they want to, basically like a hover, so this likely wasn't difficult for him. Now, for his reward, he gets to sleep amongst the stars. Dragons like sleeping, as you probably know. It's one of their favorite activities."

Because he had mentioned this during his lecture, Vini did know.

"Have you ever heard of Demon Pockets?" Albert suddenly decided to ask.

"Most definitely," the professor responded. "I knew someone once who got drawn into one. He almost died. In fact, his companion on that day did die; but the coroner said he had a heart attack. That was the official cause of death." After a short pause, he added, "But why do you ask?"

Since the professor himself was being so candid, they didn't see any reason not to share at least some of their secrets with him, whereupon, Vini confessed that they had been drawn into two Demon Pockets. "One last summer and one just the other day," she said.

"Not me though," Sam said, "just them."

"And you survived?" the professor responded, with awe. "Wow!"

"We escaped both times by following a light," Louetta said, without telling him that they were led by a halcyon while aboard Harvey's Ghost and drawn to a firebird the first time.

"A light," the professor said. "Well, that's helpful to know."

Louetta also briefly related a few details to him about each of the two experiences.

Although he didn't elaborate, Professor Fulhausen hinted that, in his youth, he had had a couple of adventures similar to what she was describing.

Since he didn't give specifics, or press Louetta for more information, they all kind of understood that some things were better kept as secrets. Vini herself, at this time, was not ready to tell Professor Fulhausen that she had the ability to summon unicorns.

"Well, it's just lucky you survived," the professor said, reaching for a piece of cake.

"No," Vini had to disagree. "It was not luck. It was God, protecting us."

"Very astute of you," the professor responded. "I believe you are correct, one hundred percent. And by the way, there is nothing more

than one hundred percent. So when a person says something has increased two or three hundred percent, that's really an erroneous way of putting things. We can say that something has tripled or quadrupled, but we can't say that anything is more than one hundred percent."

"What can you tell us about peacocks?" Vini asked next. "I mean, about their symbolism, and if they are possibly magical."

"Oh, they're definitely magical," he answered. And although he ended up telling her some things she already knew, Vini found all of the information completely fascinating:

"Peacocks have the ability to kill serpents, but not just kill, they have mastery over them too, to control them and keep them in check. By extension, this applies to sky serpents as well, so dragons would fall under the control of peacocks. And as fierce as peacocks are, I don't believe the birds would have any trouble with this task. Some of their feathers are actually shaped like swords and are called swords, this attesting to their fierceness. Some people even believe the feathers are not just feathers, but can transform into something like the equivalent of heavenly armor. Peacocks are also associated with alchemy, possibly related to the armor aspect. Legend has it that a peacock once gave some of this power to a group of doves, to armor them in some way, for some special purpose. Peacocks are also a symbol of eternity and are believed to have resurrection powers similar to phoenixes. They renew their feathers annually. The eyes of the peacock's fan can supposedly foresee danger, and are representative of God's all-seeing nature, as He is constantly watching over all of His plans. Since peacocks can swallow the venom of snakes without suffering harm, it is believed they can somehow turn the poison into healing potions, maybe using powers similar to their alchemic skills. This would make sense because even medical people have figured out how to use poisonous plants to their advantage, like belladonna being used as medicine. A peacock was present at Christ's birth, in the stable, watching over Our Savior and worshipping Him. Two more are said to guard the gates to Heaven."

Professor Fulhausen finished telling about peacocks by saying, "But I suspect it's mainly kids, along with a few adults like me that will probably never fully grow up, who can see creatures like peacocks and other birds as being magical. After all, it's well known that kids end up

seeing the most magical creatures. Adults tend to overlook them, especially with most of them being so well camouflaged.”

Nodding, Louetta confessed to having been attacked by a hobgoblin once. “He was definitely expertly camouflaged.”

“Again, God was looking out for you, since you survived,” the professor said.

“True,” Louetta agreed. “But I also think the magic of a puck troll protected me.”

“Oh, they don’t really exist,” the professor said, without knowing, of course, that the basket concealing Pizzo was on the bookshelf directly behind his chair. “Many mythical and magical creatures do exist, and some are even mentioned in the bible, like demons and night hags. But tiny trolls,” he added in a scoffing manner while shaking his head. “That’s mere fancy. Mind you, I met a man once who actually had an encounter with an albino puma; you know the kittens are twice the size of regular pumas; these are powerful creatures said to be able to scale a mountain in three leaps.”

Anticipating trouble from the scoffing, Albert stood up to move closer to Pizzo’s location (under the pretext of getting another cookie and stretching his legs). His anticipating turned out to be a good thing because he managed to catch a box of matches in midair that Pizzo, after sneaking out of the basket, had thrown at the professor. Thankfully, Professor Fulhausen didn’t notice any of this. Also thankfully, Pizzo hadn’t thrown the candlestick sitting next to the matchbox.

With Louetta giving him a sideways warning glare, Pizzo, while sticking his tongue out at Albert, again retreated to the basket.

“Speaking of the bible,” the professor added, “it’s not full of errors as some uneducated people claim. It is all completely true and fully correct. But, of course, a lot of it is mysterious. But it’s supposed to be; we are not supposed to know everything. I think that’s what a lot of people have a problem with, the mystery, along with the symbolism and prophecy.”

The professor next told them a fable called, “The Devil and the Deep Blue Sky.”

“The devil was once rendered colorblind for a hundred years as punishment when he broke a pact with God that he would not harm, touch, or come into contact with anything blue for a full year, this being

a special thing God did to protect something blue, like maybe the Rain Dragon. The reason I think this is because the sky is blue, and while the devil was not allowed to set foot in the sky, a dragon could. Plus, I once read something about indigo and azure in connection to dragons, and those are, of course, some of the colors of the sky. Anyway, Satan did make contact with the sky, and thus had to be punished for breaking the pact. During the hundred years of colorblindness, he had to have an assistant tell colors for him, like when he needed to run errands to buy new clothes, to make sure they would match. But as far as the moral of the story, to this day, people hoping to escape the influence of the devil, need only look up, to the sky. The fable also serves as a reminder that anyone hoping to escape persecution and harm can rise above it all by trusting in the things above.”

Although some of the story sounded farfetched, it also somehow had a ring of truth to it for Vini, who thought the fable might actually be related to dragons, and possibly even to her search for them. The word, indigo, specifically stuck in her mind, though she couldn't at the moment figure out why.

Professor Fulhausen also shared with his small audience a little information about magical objects, coincidentally, first telling them about an actual Ring of Truth. “This is a ring with two functions. It allows its wearer to tell if another person is lying or telling the truth. The ring also forces someone wearing it to tell the truth. One of my colleagues has determined that it does exist, and there might even be several of them. As far as where they come from or who made them, that's still a mystery.”

He went on to describe a bagical, several of which were said to exist. “A bagical is basically a magical bag that can turn ordinary objects into magical ones. The items might not look different when they come out of the bag, but they will be changed in some extraordinary way. However, people who have done research into bagicals think they have multiple functions, mainly because sometimes the objects placed inside disappear. It seems the bag likes to keep certain items, while waiting for others it evidently needs to make something else, and likely something unexpected. For instance, it might keep a deck of playing cards while waiting for a hairbrush in order to make a magical pair of scissors. Or, if a bobby pin is put in and

disappears, the bag might be waiting for a spoon and a screwdriver so that it can make something like a magical cigar box.” Smiling, the professor added, “I once knew a woman who put in a cowboy hat, a carnation, and a photograph of a bridge, all of which disappeared. What came out was a magical golf ball that allowed her to win every tournament she entered, usually by getting lots of eagles and aces, until she lost the ball after about three years of playing with it.”

“That’s incredible!” Sam exclaimed, before realizing that the professor might be pulling their legs.

“How can I find one of these bagicals?” Albert asked.

“Well, you might not truly want to own one,” the professor responded. “In fact, some scholars think bagicals are incredibly dangerous, and recommend not using them, since we can’t know exactly what they will do, or the history behind them such as who might have created them. And what if dangerous things were put into them, like weapons or poisonous snakes? Not only might bagicals be misused, they are simply too mysterious to have control over in any way. Experiments of any sort might be deadly. Even things people think they want could be dangerous for them. I once heard of a case where a man put the ball from a roulette wheel into a bagical. Afterwards, he kept it in his pocket whenever he gambled. The ball had indeed turned magical, not only allowing him to predict numbers on roulette wheels, but also letting him predict things about other casino games like blackjack and poker. Well, he got very rich with his cheating; but it eventually ruined his life. I think you can imagine why, and the various ways, he came to ruin. In another case, a woman once owned a pair of glasses from a bagical that allowed her to see one minute into the future; and this caused her all sorts of problems. Even though the glasses were destroyed, by a family member trying to help the woman, her life was basically ruined.

“So if you ever come across a bagical,” he added, “my advice would be to simply put it away and not use it, and don’t even think about it. But don’t destroy it. That could be dangerous as well, because of the power held by magical objects, not to mention the mystery behind them. I mean, who knows what might happen if someone tried to destroy one? Plus, the bags might have some important place in the world, so they really shouldn’t be destroyed. Some people who acquire

bagicals but don't want to keep them simply give them away, like using them to wrap a gift in or put donations in for a thrift store. In this way, they pass the responsibility off to someone else without risking possible repercussions from destroying the bagical. And who knows, the one who ends up with the bag might be the perfect person to take charge of it, like maybe as part of God's plan."

Vini didn't think Professor Fulhausen was pulling their legs about either bagicals or the Ring of Truth; in fact, she could tell that he believed everything he was saying. However, as far as things actually ringing true, she found herself not particularly able to tell whether the information he had given them was correct or not. Both the ring and bagicals sort of sounded like they might possibly exist. *Maybe I'll do my own research into it, she thought, but probably after I find dragons. I've just got too many other things on my mind right now to focus on anything new.*

At the end of the teatime, just before departing with a bag of cookies, the professor posed a question to them, one that had evidently long puzzled scholars of magical creatures; and it was one Vini was familiar with. "How does the Chinese dragon fly if it doesn't have wings?"

Everyone helped to clean up in the parlor after the teatime, which is when Vini noticed something odd, but slightly familiar. The room suddenly felt eerily chilly, almost like when a demon had been hiding up the parlor chimney, but they hadn't known it. With summer still in full swing, no rooms in the mansion (which had no air conditioning) should have felt cold, not even the basement. And the ceiling fan wasn't currently on because Louetta, also feeling somewhat chilly, had switched it off after the professor left. In thinking of her dream of demon possession, and specifically as to whether or not the possession had already taken place, what was currently ringing true to her was that it had indeed already happened, so she was definitely trying to be as observant and cautious as possible around family and friends.

With Albert setting off to call his girlfriend, and Louetta and Sam carrying trays and platters to the kitchen, Vini stayed behind in the room in order to check the chimney. The flue was tightly fastened and nothing looked or felt odd about the fireplace. After checking the flue, she noticed the chill had left the room. With the parlor feeling perfectly

normal again, and even a little warm and stuffy without the circulation from the fan, as she was heading to the kitchen with the last load of cups and plates, Vini chalked up the odd feeling to having thoughts of demons on her brain lately, along with their somewhat chilling teatime discussion of Demon Pockets.

Piszo was already in the kitchen, sitting on the edge of a chair (which was also his table) while having his cake, sandwiches, and cookies. While munching, he played with a ladybug crawling back and forth across his knees.

After cleaning up and storing leftovers in the refrigerator, Louetta went to pack, since she and Albert would be leaving the next day.

Sam set off on his bicycle for home soon after, with a couple of sandwiches and a bag of cookies for Ben stored in his backpack. A piece of cake likely would have gotten squashed, so he decided against taking one with him. However, Vini placed a thick slice in the freezer and labeled it “For Ben” so that he could have a treat the next time he came to work.

When Piszo finished his goodies, after belching loudly several times while letting the ladybug out the kitchen’s screen door, he too left to be about the rest of his afternoon.

Having finished work for the day, Vini took herself to the downstairs library to do a little research. Switching on lights and fans, she checked the dehumidifier because the room felt a little muggy. Since it was set correctly and seemed to be working fine, she simply turned the airflow of the ventilation system up a notch, which helped to make the whole library feel drier and fresher within just a few minutes.

One of the first things she looked for was information on Chinese dragons, which she found in abundance in several old volumes on myth and magic in a section of the library devoted entirely to China.

It seemed many people believed the Chinese dragon could fly because it wasn’t made of much earthly substance, and was therefore light and airy enough to ride on certain winds and breezes that its magic was able to manipulate. The idea of using the wind sounded correct. In knowing that Tulko was easily able to fly without wings, Vini thought the Chinese dragon could probably use air much like a wind horse. Others believed the dragon could channel currents of energy known as Chi (sometimes called “the cosmic breath of the universe”) in order to

travel. Aside from the issue of flying, one book speculated that dragons were sometimes called sky serpents because Chinese dragons don't have wings and look like giant snakes in the sky.

In a different section of the library, while looking up camouflages of various magical creatures, she found a mention of enormice, and discovered that the creatures were indeed well camouflaged, but were probably not invisible because the book simply said that they had the ability to blend in perfectly with their surroundings. In another book she discovered that enormice have a power relating to the camouflage of other creatures in that they can reveal a creature in concealment when in close proximity to that creature. If it wasn't the power to disrupt the camouflage, it was probably that the enormouse could somehow distract the other creature into forgetting to use its hiding abilities. Another power the enormouse possessed was the ability to terrify with its cry, which was something like a high-pitched war cry, the squeal of which was evidently excruciating to the ears of certain other creatures like gremlins and demons, thus having the effect of driving them away.

While Vini was reading about Chinese dragons and enormice, Pizzo was doing a bit of research of his own in his snug little den in the basement wall.

Since Professor Fulhausen had said magical creatures were in the bible, in the hopes of finding puck trolls mentioned, Pizzo was reading his own little bible, which, though very small for a bible, was still quite big for him, at just slightly larger than an ordinary deck of playing cards. The professor had also said that everything in the bible was true and correct; and Pizzo definitely liked things that were true and correct much better than things that weren't.

He kept the bible in one corner of his room. Sitting on a little stool, one that Mrs. Doyle had bought for him at a dollhouse store, he flipped pages, reading carefully. Mrs. Doyle had given him the bible too. And Mr. Doyle, long ago, had rigged electricity in his den, so that he might have light, by way of an outlet and a short string of clear Christmas lights, complete with plenty of spare bulbs and fuses. After the outlet was installed, the wall was expertly sealed up again so Pizzo could have his privacy and remain protected from outsiders knowing where he lived. Pizzo also had a mini flashlight from a keychain that Dave had recently given him, with a new battery and two spares.

Piszo had, of course, learned to read over the years. Living in a house with two huge libraries, one so enormous that probably five or ten people could read their whole lives and never reach the end of the books, he would have naturally learned to read. However, as far as his little bible, he had only occasionally read some of the psalms and proverbs, and few of the parables that Jesus taught, and not much else so far.

Whether or not he would ever find puck trolls mentioned, he would come to find most of the bible very interesting, mainly because he loved history books, and didn't mind a little mystery thrown in.

Vini left the mansion just before six, after hugging Albert and Louetta goodbye, since she wouldn't be seeing them again before they left.

Just before going to bed, while brushing her hair and thinking about everything the professor had said about peacocks, Vini gazed thoughtfully at the feather from camp, currently in the pencil holder on her desk. Though smaller than some, at only a little over a foot long, the feather was striking in both markings and color. Indeed, as she stared at it, the eye fairly mesmerized her, so much so that it continued to hold her thoughts even as she drifted off to sleep, which is probably why she ended up having a dream about a peacock feather.

Actually, the dream started with something rather comical and unrelated to the feather. Vini was in the parlor of the mansion and was being questioned by a detective investigating the murder of Professor Fulhausen who was lying on the parlor floor. While the idea of murder should never be considered funny, this one was because Vini was evidently in the middle of a real-life game of *Clue*, but one with the objects and characters being much different, as well as outlandishly odder, than those of the board game.

Taking notes as he questioned her in a grave manner, the detective said, "So it was Piszo, in the parlor, with a matchbox." With Vini nodding, he said, "Are you sure it wasn't one of these because there's blood on his shoulder?" He was pointing to a vase full of peacock feathers, both eyes and swords. Picking up one of the eyes and handing it to her, the detective asked, "And where exactly were you when the murder was being committed?"

As Vini's fingers touched the feather, the room and everything in it, including the detective, slowly faded away, and she found herself standing on a steep and grassy hilltop in the deserted countryside, still holding the feather, the eye of which she suddenly decided to look through as though looking through the spyglass on Harvey's Ghost. What she saw through the eye was herself, lying on her back very near the bottom of the steep hill, in a position with her head higher on the incline and her feet lower.

A moment later, she was no longer looking through the eye of the feather, but was actually lying on the hill, in the exact spot where she had seen herself. Rising to her elbows, she noticed two poisonous snakes starting to slither towards her from the base of the hill. As the creatures started up the hill, Vini inched backwards on her elbows, basically dragging herself by her elbows upwards on the slope, and doing this without using her feet or legs at all for assistance. For some reason, it didn't occur to her to use them, or to rise and run, even when two more snakes appeared on either side of her, but just slightly downslope, and started moving towards her. Again, instead of rising, she simply dragged herself higher up the hill by her elbows, actually rather easily, which surprised her, even within the bounds of a dream in which just about anything might happen. And she still never used her feet or legs, even when more snakes started coming at her from both sides. While the snakes always started just downslope from her, they were slithering very fast; but she was somehow able to continue to outdistance them, just dragging herself by her elbows uphill. Although this went on for quite some time, with more and more snakes appearing and coming after her, Vini never tired. She simply continued to drag herself along, always maintaining a lead over the snakes to remain safe from their reach. Her dream ended right in the middle of the elbow race up the seemingly never-ending hill.

In the morning, Vini was correctly able to interpret her own dream. Since it had started with something like the game of *Clue*, she also thought of the *Snakes on a Hill* as a kind of game, or maybe a race.

The snakes might be either Satan or obstacles in the world, she told herself. Uphill means I am striving for something. The fact that I am outdistancing the snakes means I am making progress, and staying safe and secure. It didn't seem there was an end to the game, so I imagine

I'll need to keep working and being diligent in doing this for the rest of my life.

Upon contemplating further, another thought came to her. *If I can manage to stay ahead of the snakes just by dragging myself up a hill on my elbows, imagine what I could do if I stood up and started to run.*

Satan was, of course, associated with snakes; and she had been able to resist both him and his influences, even in some of the darkest times of her life, by trusting in God and believing in His Word. Smiling, Vini also remembered what May had said—that most snakes will flee from people—and a bible quote popped into her brain, from James 4:7. “Resist the devil and he will flee from you.” *But it was actually the other way around in my dream. I was fleeing.*

However, the more she thought about it, she wasn't necessarily fleeing from Satan, she was just outdistancing him, and resisting him, while making progress toward becoming who God meant for her to be, a good servant.

This is more of a race than a game, she decided, recalling part of Hebrews 12:1. “...let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us...”

As always when seeking God's guidance and reassurance, Vini prayed, after which, she opened her bible randomly and was slightly surprised to find her eyes draw to a warning, in Jeremiah 48:10. “Cursed is he who does the work of the Lord with slackness....”

While God often encouraged her with His Word, He also gave her commands, reminders, and admonishments.

Thinking carefully, Vini felt she understood His message to her.

Part of my work, and my race, is to find dragons, she reminded herself. *And I haven't done nearly as much research on dragons as I did for unicorns when I was looking for them. God is right to remind me to be diligent and work hard. Of course, He's always right, about everything.*

Saying another prayer, to thank God for speaking to her through His Word, Vini resolved, right then and there, to step up her efforts toward finding dragons.

Chapter Seven

Topiary Troubles

On Friday at work, after cleaning for most of the morning, Vini spent the rest of the day doing research. With Albert and Louetta gone, the mansion was very quiet.

In addition to finding a couple more mentions as to how much dragons like to sleep, she discovered that the rainbow, in addition to being a promise from God not to flood the earth again as He had in Noah's time, was once a symbol of dragons, and that dragons might be more colorful than people might think. *Instead of a pot of gold, we might find a dragon at the end of a rainbow; sleeping, of course, Vini jokingly told herself, before her brain pondered a more serious consideration. Since dragons really like to sleep, maybe I'm supposed to wake them up...well, find them first...then wake them up.*

Sam was arriving to work through the back gate just as Vini was leaving in the late afternoon, and they waved to one another.

Coming to the mansion again on Saturday, in being all caught up with her cleaning, Vini spent the entire morning and part of the afternoon doing research. Of course, in addition to using the libraries, she was keeping an eye on the house, since Dave and Violet weren't due home until sometime late on Sunday.

Mr. Galloway, in knowing that Albert and Louetta were gone, was keeping watch evenings, often from the top of his two-story gazebo, but also by patrolling around the estate. Indeed, he had come over on Friday evening to make sure all of the doors were locked. Although Vini, Sam, and Ben always remembered to lock up when leaving if no one else was still there, Mr. Galloway, being a member of the Neighborhood Watch, had simply wanted to make sure.

Ben was working Saturday, but was in something of a hurry because he had archery practice scheduled with Preston later at an indoor range nearby where they often practiced.

Charlie was back from her culinary adventure late Saturday evening, and Vini's mother dropped Vini off at Charlie's house after church on Sunday so the girls could spend some time together. Charlie's dad was off bidding a construction job, so they had the house to themselves, except for Boomer, who raced around so much with excitement that Charlie let him out into the back yard, so that he could use up some of his energy chasing birds and squirrels before coming back in again.

After having lunch, Vini helped Charlie to unpack and do laundry. In addition to having brought Vini a t-shirt back with the culinary school's logo on it, Charlie had a lot to tell her best friend about her two weeks at the camp. She had met a guy named Austin, but was not telling her dad about him yet. They had a lot of the same goals and had evidently really hit it off. They had also both been doing a lot of research into culinary schools and might end up going to the same one in the future, though not likely the one where the camp was held.

After hearing Charlie's news, Vini launched into the whole Harvey's Ghost adventure, as well as sharing a few details about their teatime with the professor.

For some reason, hearing about the Demon Pocket made Charlie think of her visions of Ben and Sam. In a soup pot at the culinary school, she had again seen one brother kill the other. Although she still couldn't tell which was which, one of the twins had looked different this time, and not so much like his brother after all, in being slightly taller and darker, almost as though in the process of transforming from himself into something else. *But into what?* Charlie couldn't tell. *And which one wasn't his usual self?* She also couldn't tell. Because this was such a mystery, Charlie still wasn't sure she wanted to mention the issue to Vini.

However, as they were folding laundry, Vini noticed that Charlie, based on varying expressions of puzzlement and concentration, seemed oddly distant, as though contemplating something very deeply; and in knowing that someone close to her was probably possessed, Vini wondered if it might be Charlie. *What if something happened to her on her trip?*

Drawn out of her trance by Boomer barking crazily in the back yard, Charlie noticed Vini eyeing her strangely, guardedly, which made

her suddenly wary of her friend, in particular, of sharing the vision about the twins with her. Not only did the timing not seem quite right yet, with Vini looking at her in such an odd manner, Charlie wasn't sure she could trust her.

With both girls being and acting cautious, they ended up in rather an awkward and almost funny scenario of staring suspiciously at one another for a full minute, after which, they avoided eye contact as they exchanged light banter until Vini's mother picked her up a half-hour later.

On Monday morning, Vini was pleased to see Violet and Dave, who had returned home Sunday evening. Violet was happy to report that her Aunt Eugenia would indeed be coming to live with them, sometime after Christmas, probably about mid-January. "She needs time to wrap things up, get the house ready to sell, sell it, and some of her belongings, like a lot of her furniture, since she won't need a whole houseful here." With Vini nodding her understanding, Violet went on. "Plus, she just wants to take her time. I don't blame her; this is like being uprooted. But I'll be so happy to have her here. She was my favorite aunt growing up. Now, I can help look after her as she gets older."

Violet had gone to look after her aunt when she had gall bladder surgery the previous summer, which was how Vini had come to work at the mansion in the first place, as a substitute for Violet. Feeling more help was needed to care for such a large house, Mrs. Doyle had kept Vini on even after Violet's return.

School was set to start in exactly one week, and Vini's mother had already taken both Vini and Preston back-to-school shopping. Though busy now, once school started again, the days were sure to get busier, which was why Vini for sure wanted to get a lot of research done during this final week of summer.

On breaks and after work on Tuesday, she pored over books and Mrs. Doyle's journals, reading and taking notes. Though everything was interesting, she found nothing in particular that might lead her toward dragons, wherever they might be in the world of today.

In the evening, Tulko took her for a ride, which was something they hadn't done together for quite a while because he had been off helping with hurricane season, stirring up storms in some places, while calming

them in others. Much as they used to, Vini and Tulko ended up doing something important on their outing. Observing two men in a secluded back yard breaking into a home just three blocks from her house, they knew they needed to stop the crime. After dropping Vini off on the street beside the house, Tulko, while holding position high over the back yard, used his windy powers to pin the men to the home's small storage shed, while Vini lightly tossed sticks at the windows of a neighbor's two-story house that had a view into the back yard where the men were being held. The noise made a woman inside the house turn on her floodlights and look out of one of her higher windows, where she saw the criminals. In knowing her neighbor was out of town, the woman immediately called the police. Tulko stayed in position until the police arrived to take matters in hand, before picking up Vini who had skedaddled a short ways down the street to wait for him.

The attempted break-in was a little too close for Vini's comfort, and she was immensely glad they had all been so diligent in keeping an eye on the mansion while Dave and Violet were gone.

Passing Mr. Galloway's estate while walking to work on Wednesday morning, Vini noticed that her neighbor was attacking an iris bed most ferociously with a shovel and a hoe, and she thought he might be killing a snake or something. In truth, Mr. Galloway was very troubled, and simply being upset had led to the attack on the flowers.

"No, no snakes," he answered when she inquired, "just taking out some of my frustrations. The irises need thinning anyway."

When Vini asked if there was anything she could do to help, Mr. Galloway confessed that he was rather embroiled in a mess, one that had actually started when Vini was away at camp. Surprisingly, the mess involved one of his topiaries in his front yard, a lovely Christian cross that he had sculpted at the start of summer out of a tall yew tree. Though fairly new, the cross was already Vini's favorite of all of Mr. Galloway's creations.

"I consider this to be the crowning jewel of the garden," he told Vini. "But a neighbor is taking me to court over it. She filed a complaint with a request that the cross either be removed or for the shape to be changed."

"Which neighbor?" Vini asked.

“Not a close neighbor,” he told her. “She lives over on Bachman, Mrs. Wharton.”

“I’ve never heard of her,” Vini responded.

“She evidently drives down Paloma regularly, and she doesn’t feel she should have to look at it every day.”

“But this is your own personal property,” Vini said. “Surely she can’t have a good case against someone else’s bushes and trees.”

“These days you never know,” Mr. Galloway answered, shaking his head. “And I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. This is a season of time in which Christians are being persecuted, in many different ways, freedom of expression being one of them.”

Vini also was not all that surprised, and could very well relate to this, having been the victim of persecution in the spring when she handed out sand dollars at school with a religious poem attached, this being the action that had gotten her expelled from school and landed her in legal trouble.

“We’re under the same Home Owner’s Association as people over on Bachman, and she filed a complaint with them too; well, it’s called a report. But I didn’t need approval from the Home Owner’s Association because the cross is not a structure, and we don’t have rules governing landscaping. I checked with the HOA after she filed her report, thinking they might consider this an artistic feature, which we do have to have approval for, if large, like a giant statue or a huge painting done on the side of a garage or along a whole fence. But they said they would not consider topiaries to be artistic features, even if they are artistic, because they are firmly in the category of landscaping. So they aren’t following up on her report, other than sending her a letter saying that the cross is considered landscaping, which is entirely the homeowner’s domain.” With a sigh, he added, “Anyway, the hearing about the complaint is tomorrow. I just really hope the judge doesn’t make me cut it down or change it to something shaped like a square hot dog.”

Evidently, Mrs. Galloway had been away most of the summer, and was still away, visiting her sister. In their phone conversations, Mr. Galloway hadn’t told his wife about the troubles and was glad to spare her the stress and worry over the situation. “I’ll tell her when she gets back, no sense in spoiling her fun with her sister.”

Mr. Galloway had wholeheartedly supported Vini when she had her legal troubles. Now, she found herself wanting to help him; but she didn't particularly know what she could do. However, she did tell him, "When I had my troubles in the spring, I prayed, and it really helped, both praying and reading the bible actually."

Mr. Galloway was a step ahead of her on this. Bounding to his gazebo, he retrieved his bible from one of the chairs. Bounding back, he said breathlessly, "Just yesterday, I found the perfect passage of scripture, 1 Peter 3:13-16," which he then proceeded to read to her.

"Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is right? But even if you do suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence; and keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are abused, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame."

"That is perfect," Vini agreed, committing the book and verse numbers to memory, so she could read the passage herself later.

Since his mood had lightened, Mr. Galloway smiled and said, "You know, I think square hot dogs would be a really good culinary idea, because they wouldn't roll around so much. You might mention them to that Charlie friend of yours."

"I will," Vini answered, smiling back, because she too thought the idea a good one.

Vini prayed for Mr. Galloway that night, for God to help him through this difficult time, much as He had helped her when she was going through her school and court troubles.

Violet and Vini went to the hearing, to show their support for Mr. Galloway. Two groups of protestors were gathered outside the courthouse, one prayer group, and an organization focused on eliminating public displays of Christianity such as crosses, Nativity scenes, and plaques listing the Ten Commandments. This was a group called Insight that probably should have been called Incite, for as much stirring up of trouble as they did.

After each side gave their arguments, and presented photographs, Judge Nettle took only a brief time to consider, upon which he sided

with Mr. Galloway, who was not going to have to change the cross, or remove it, or make any other type of alteration.

Additionally, the judge stated he felt this had been a horrible waste of the court's time. However, he did take the time to consult a map of the city, after which, he suggested to Mrs. Wharton that she take Finch Lane to and from her work, shopping, and other errands, rather than traveling on Paloma Drive. "In that way," Judge Nettle said, "you can avoid seeing the object that you find so offensive." He also told Mrs. Wharton's attorney that he was assigning Mr. Galloway's legal fees to the complainant, since he didn't feel the case was legitimate.

Mrs. Wharton's attorney heartily objected, of course. "This is completely inappropriate because the defendant hasn't brought a counterclaim."

"Well, it's more appropriate to pay now," the judge replied, "because if a counterclaim is filed, more legal fees will be added, and it will be even more of a waste of the court's time, which I don't think any judge will look favorably on."

Mr. Galloway was hurriedly consulting with his attorney, who quickly told the judge, "If the plaintiff agrees to pay the legal fees of my client relating to this matter thus far, we will agree not to file a counterclaim."

Again, Mrs. Wharton's lawyer raised an objection. "Your Honor, this is completely inappropriate."

The judge responded in a firm manner. "If you tell me one more time what's inappropriate in my courtroom, I'll hold you in contempt."

Before calling for his next case, Judge Nettle also took the opportunity to express a personal opinion. "If people weren't bringing silly things like this to court, they might use the money they would have spent on legal fees to feed hungry people, or make some sort of other difference in the world, instead of objecting frivolously to things like freedom of expression, religious or otherwise."

While she may not have been surprised by the complaint, Vini was pleasantly surprised by the outcome. *What a way for a judge to stand up for what is right.* Indeed, she thought Judge Nettle a most admirable man.

Mr. Galloway was himself very pleased, of course. And he wouldn't particularly know it but, upon hearing the verdict, all of the

topiaries on his property were pleased too, along with a couple of other creatures, namely, the enormouse who lived in Mr. Galloway's root cellar, and Heike, the girl puck troll living in a den under one corner of his kitchen floor. Heike also had a little retreat set up under Mr. Galloway's garden shed, in the form of a set of dollhouse patio furniture, along with a few other items like miniature cups and saucers so that she could enjoy picnics in the garden.

Heike had been very sad (to the point of feeling depressed) upon learning that someone had complained about the cross, which she thought was absolutely beautiful, not to mention being made from her favorite kind of tree.

In addition to feeling sad, she was worried the yew tree might have to be cut down. Hearing the good news greatly relieved her, and served to pull her out of her doldrums, whereupon, she decided to visit her friend at the mansion across the street because she thought surely Pizzo would want to know the good news about Mr. Galloway's cross. He generally liked to know anything about the topiaries in the neighborhood because he was such an admirer of that type of art.

She took the secret puck tunnel, the entrance of which was under the gazebo. However, crossing beneath the side garden, and under the sidewalk and street, she wasn't even halfway to the mansion when she ran into Pizzo, literally, who had just heard the news from Violet and Vini and was hurrying to tell his friend across the street. After bumping noses and chins, the pair had a good laugh, before Pizzo strolled with Heike back to Mr. Galloway's property, where they had tea together under the garden shed.

At home in the evening, Vini was trying to read but was having some difficulty because Preston was being loud in the back yard with one of his treehouse friends.

Since he was with a friend, Vini didn't holler at him to be quiet as she might have on another occasion. Instead, she did her best to ignore both boys; and she did so even later, while getting a glass of water in the kitchen when the boys excitedly came inside to tell Mrs. Aberdeen something.

Preston was still loud even after his friend left, while watching a soccer game on television and when in his room rearranging his closet. Vini did her best to tune him out. While she had thought he was

growing up some, it seemed to her that he had recently turned back into her “annoying little brother” again.

That same night, Vini once more had the dream about the circle of friends. This time, she was almost certain that Preston was the one possessed; and she woke up feeling very uneasy. However, in the bright morning light, and while having breakfast with a very chipper Preston, who seemed much improved over the day before as far as not being so loud and irritating, she talked herself out of some of her suspicion.

However, on her walk to work, she once more started thinking about her brother. While he had still seemed perfectly normal during breakfast, and even afterwards when setting off to his friend’s treehouse for the day taking a sack lunch and a stack of comic books with him, Vini couldn’t help but think about how easily Satan could deceive; in fact, he was even called a deceiver in the bible. What if Preston and his friends were not just reading comic books, trading cards from some game they liked to play, and eating peanut butter sandwiches? What if they were involved in something like devil worship? Vini certainly thought this possible because Eleta was never with him in the treehouse. Since Preston’s friends didn’t know he had a magical creature attached to him, he couldn’t just show up at the treehouse with her.

Working and researching all day helped to dispel most of her ugly and suspicious thoughts, mainly because she enjoyed both of these activities so much.

On the walk home, in glancing up, she saw a shadow within a cloud that looked exactly like a thimble, and a fancy one at that, with a symmetrical pattern of diamond shapes circling the top half of the thimble. Knowing well that this was one of the ways God often spoke to her, after admiring the cloud shadow, she carefully committed the details to memory. Smiling, she recalled other ways in which God had sent her messages before, not just through tapestries and the bible, but using things like clocks, shoes, and even once a coffee spill.

At work on a break on Saturday, Vini was on the back porch visiting with Ben who was taking a break from pruning and weeding, two seemingly never-ending jobs on the estate.

“I’ve been doing a little reading up on unicorns,” Ben said, “well, both reading and thinking. And I sort of have an idea, in case you haven’t thought of it before.”

His idea was somewhat long-winded, but was absolutely fascinating, in that it had to do with the fact that he believed unicorns could make time travel possible, because they could travel faster than the speed of light, which, according to experts, would be necessary for time travel to occur. Of course, since human beings couldn’t currently travel faster than the speed of light, time travel wasn’t, at present, possible. But after Ben explained a few things about the Theory of Relativity, in putting it together with unicorns, Vini was completely sold on the idea.

“So if any person can find a way to travel faster than the speed of light, time will start to travel backwards,” Ben continued, “which is why most experts agree that only backwards time travel would be possible, not forwards. The exception to this would be God, of course, Who is already in all places of time simultaneously, this being a given since He is the same all of our yesterdays, today, and all of our tomorrows.”

Ben then went on to tell her about several good science fiction books he had read recently that had to do with time travel, after which, he set off to the rear of the estate to prune the massive dragonfly topiary, which he often had trouble keeping in check because the creature’s wings seemed to want to grow twice as fast as its body.

When finished with work for the day, Vini did a little more research in the downstairs library before going home; and she looked up the Theory of Relativity, along with a few other things relating to the possibility of time travel, which all seemed incredibly complicated to her, especially since science had never been her best subject. But putting all of this in context with what she knew about unicorns made her again ponder something she had thought of before, which was the reason she needed to find unicorns before looking for dragons.

In all of the time she had been trusting in and following God, she always felt He was leading her in a very specific sequence. And since she believed God might be speaking to her through Ben, she wondered if she was supposed to time travel somewhere, to find something to do with dragons, or perhaps to find the dragons themselves. If He didn’t lead her directly to them, she felt God would at least lead her to a piece

of the puzzle; after all, that was how she had found unicorns, piece by piece.

Violet was also working in the downstairs library. She had started the cataloging project, a task she found a little trying, not because it was overly difficult, but more because she found herself missing her Cousin Frances terribly. In unpacking a few boxes from various library shelves, she had found several old photo albums, one of which had pictures of Frances at probably around age thirteen or fourteen. Taking a break from the cataloging, she shared the album with Vini.

“So Mrs. Doyle was tall even as a girl,” Vini remarked. Indeed, standing next to her sister, Annabelle, young Frances looked nearly like a giantess.

A family Christmas photo showed Frances and Annabelle with their brothers, one tall and one short. “How different they all look from one another,” Vini said.

“Charles and Edward,” Violet said. “Edward is the tall one; he ended up contracting polio and was in a wheelchair most of his life.”

Vini had met Annabelle before, at Mrs. Doyle’s funeral, but both brothers had already passed away by the time Vini came to work at the mansion.

Both Violet and Vini were a little tearful in looking through more photographs in a second album, which included some of Gerald at a fairly young age too, perhaps seventeen or eighteen. Sniffing as she looked at Frances’ high school graduation picture, Vini said, “She had such dark hair as a girl, but it was so white when I knew her, white like a big cotton ball.”

On her walk home, Vini noticed Mr. Galloway carefully pruning the yew cross, while whistling a happy tune. While the troubles over the cross had reminded Vini of some of the meanness in the world, the event had also in a way been a good thing because, as a counter to the meanness, she had sought out some of God’s uplifting promises from the bible. These were her go-to verses, ones she had recorded in the back of both her first journal, and in the second she had recently started. When recording the verses, she paraphrased them to make them more personal to her.

Stopping to talk to Mr. Galloway, Vini told him about her list of God’s promises, before saying, “And when I was reading through them

the other day, I found quite a few that really seemed to fit your topiary situation.” With this she recited a good many of them for him. ““God holds my right hand, I mean *yours*, He holds *your* right hand. (Since she was used to reciting them to herself, the promises, of course, needed to be changed slightly to apply to Mr. Galloway.) He is your rear guard. He will go before you and level mountains. When you walk, your step will not be hampered; and if you run, you will not stumble. Those who war with you shall be nothing at all. You will seek those who contend with you but you shall not find them. Your builders outstrip your destroyers. He has appointed watchmen to watch over you. When you fall, you will rise again. He is the light of the world; those who follow Him shall not walk in darkness. God loves you. He gave His only Son for you. Even to your gray hairs He will carry you. He will bear. He will save. The Lord is with you as a dread warrior, therefore, your persecutors will stumble.””

Smiling, Mr. Galloway agreed with God’s Every Word.

Over the next few weeks, as word of Mr. Galloway’s recent troubles spread, Vini would come to notice many other neighbors displaying crosses too, of various kinds. There were two more topiary ones, several metal wall hangings, and a nearly ten-foot high wooden cross right out in the middle of Mr. and Mrs. Garza’s front lawn. And Vini would come to find out that Violet herself had ordered three special ones made for the gates of the mansion.

Chapter Eight

Etowa and Boko

School started with a flurry on Monday, and Vini immediately found herself busy with her studies and water polo, along with research in the evenings with books borrowed from the mansion's libraries that she traded in and out while working weekends and occasionally an afternoon or two. She was able to spend some time with Charlie, but not a lot because Charlie was keeping busy with volleyball and catering jobs on weekends. The girls mainly just had lunch together most days at school to catch up.

Except for the time spent in the Demon Pocket, Vini's life in recent weeks had been relatively safe. And she most often felt safe, mainly because Tulko was generally keeping watch over her. But as it turns out, lately, his protection wasn't what was actually keeping her from harm. And she was in great danger, not particularly from demons, which both Vini and Tulko were learning well how to deal with, but from quite a different sort of creature—the one Satan had specifically assigned to take care of the human known as Vini Aberdeen.

His name was Boko, and he was a being very unlike most others in the universe. In fact, only one other creature was like Boko in all of creation; and his name was Etowa.

Etowa and Boko were created by God, and were given great powers relating to time. While still fully under God's control, Etowa and Boko were outside of time. They were created outside of time and were given the ability to roam outside of time, to travel anywhere and anytime within the time that God created.

God Himself was also completely outside of time, of course, having created it (and because he kept full control of it, as He did everything); thus, He was not in any way limited by the rules governing time. However, even His most powerful creations, such as angels, had limits placed on them with regards to time. For instance, Satan in the Endtimes will be confined for a period of one thousand years. Etowa

and Boko were exceptions to these restrictions, having complete freedom relating to time, though they did have other limitations. For example, they both lacked the physical strength of angels, their bodies being more similar to human beings. They also lacked wings and therefore couldn't fly like angels. However, being outside of time, neither particularly needed speed. Indeed, they never even walked fast when needing to travel, being content to simply stroll. In truth, having never needed to hurry, they didn't even know the meaning of the word, and might not have been able to figure out how to hurry, if for some reason they became inclined to do so. However, while outside of time, in existing as singular beings, they could not be in multiple places at once. But, again, this would be unnecessary. Since outside of time, neither would ever need to be in two places at once, because each place would keep, within time, until it was reached, eventually. (There was no hurry.)

The personalities of Etowa and Boko were much in keeping with this laid-back, no-hurry state of being, so much so that emotions and emotional reactions were pretty much unnecessary and almost nonexistent for them. As such, the pair wore benign expressions most of the time, nondescript and almost wistful, and something that could possibly be likened to a soft version of a matter-of-fact or whatever expression. As far as physical characteristics, they looked much like tall, pale human men, but with perhaps a windswept and wispy look about them, though winds and wisps of any kind might not particularly affect them, in their places outside of time.

In showing very little emotion, the pair might have appeared disinterested; but in truth, they were anything but, being very interested in doing the bidding of those commanding them.

While both Etowa and Boko were originally intended to be good and faithful servants of God, Boko had long ago been corrupted by Satan in a manner somewhat similar to the way Adam and Eve were tricked into corruption. Both Etowa and Boko had free will, just like angels and human beings, and could choose evil rather than good, which is exactly what Boko did. Blessedly, Etowa had not, and was still very much in the service of God; and in this capacity, was acting as a countermeasure against the efforts of Boko, Etowa's actions being a large part of what was currently keeping Vini from harm.

Before their separation into good versus evil, which the pair often called The Great Divide, Etowa and Boko had been great friends. And they often worked together, having mainly been created for the purpose of helping God fix certain things in history, so that everything would flow smoothly into His overall plan, and so that He wouldn't have to step in as often to fix things Himself. Of course, God didn't particularly need help, being All Powerful. But He enjoyed creating things (obviously, since He created the whole universe and everything in it), and He liked to give the creatures He created purpose and fulfillment. Professor Fulhausen was correct when he said that God expects all of His creations to work, because God wants everyone to be fully occupied and live a useful existence.

Now, after the separation, Etowa and Boko were of course enemies who were also something like bookends, with perhaps one placed at the beginning of the narrow path to heaven, and the other positioned at the end of the broad and worldly path to hell. But while they may have appeared to some as though they were standing still like bookends (because in truth they didn't move around much), they were in fact both currently working.

Under God's close direction, Etowa's current main task was undoing things done by Boko. For example, Etowa sent the peacock to the trailside at Camp Burberry Wiffle, to kill the snake that Boko had driven to that spot from another location, well off the trail. Additionally, while Boko had placed the sphere-like object on Harvey's Ghost to lure Vini, Etowa had drawn the attention of the mermaid (who then alerted the halcyon) to those trapped in the Demon Pocket.

Measure, then countermeasure, was how they most often worked, like playing a game of chess, constantly, and one that might never end, which would be of little concern to either Boko or Etowa, being outside of time. And speaking of games, the pair did, in fact, often get together to play a game called Ketto Benasakk that was very similar to chess, but that was, in fact, a lot more complicated, in that it used twelve game boards and had many more pieces acting as the players to equal basically seven armies, each complete with an array of magical creatures acting as helpers and protectors. However, the fact that Ketto Benasakk was complex hardly mattered since the two had all the time in the world. They played in a strange little room, shaped like a bubble,

with the game boards floating about them, and the players themselves sitting cross-legged on floating discs that were extremely fluffy like over-stuffed pillows. Although on complete opposite sides, good versus evil, being the only two creatures of their kind, Etowa and Boko basically felt it was appropriate to spend leisure time with one another.

As far as their work game, while Etowa most often took action in answer to Boko's deeds, he was sometimes proactive, acting first, ahead of his counterpart. This had been the case with regard to Hul and Skugga, shortly after their stunt in the orchard on Plum Acres Ranch, when Etowa sent them on a wild goose chase, literally, just to get them out of the picture for a while.

Satan, his fellow fallen angels, and his demons were not the only ones that could practice expert deception. Indeed, Etowa had planted a seed that blossomed into an idea for the pair of demons, and one that soon became a command. The idea was something along the lines that a particular goose, one that was part of a gigantic flock, would end up uncovering an item that would be useful to Vini and the twins, this being a unicorn whistle. Ignorant of the way some humans like Vini were able to call unicorns, and because unicorn whistles did actually exist, off the demons went, to stop the goose, one with particular markings. And with their inferior brains not able to work out that they had been tricked, Hul and Skugga would likely stay at this task for quite some time, since the gigantic flock of geese totaled over two thousand in number, and because the particular markings didn't actually exist on any of the over two thousand.

In keeping with the literal aspect of the goose chase, Etowa had used a literal seed as well, seeds being a tool he used regularly in his work. As one of their many talents, both Etowa and Boko were easily able to manufacture magic seeds, not only to plant ideas, but for a variety of other purposes such as creating fire, cloaking certain objects or beings, generating storms, and producing deceptive images.

Just about any seed could be infused with influences and magic. As far as the ones intended to work on living beings, while some seeds simply exuded their powers, others needed to be consumed to be effective. Some were designed to break at certain times, causing fine dust-like particles to fly out to be breathed in, with the dust being something that could also easily dissolve in water for the intended

subject to drink. Though easier and more practical to use seeds around the size of those found in cucumbers and watermelons, the pair often took the time to make miniscule magical seeds, as a kind of challenging exercise, using even the tiniest of seeds such as those found in poppies and thistles.

Etowa, though pleased at his success in diverting the attentions of Hul and Skugga, didn't show it. This was not only because stoicism and indifference were characteristic of his personality; but rather, he seldom showed emotion because it was a waste of energy. And like other magical creatures, he fed on the goodness in humankind, which had been in much shorter supply than evil for many long years. While Boko had learned to consume foulness for sustenance—a task that had been difficult to learn and that would be impossible for some less-advanced creatures to master when deciding to convert from good to evil—Etowa, even to save himself from starving, would not have been able to convert wickedness to goodness for use as food.

Despite having plenty to nourish him, Boko also didn't waste energy on emotions, as he simply had no taste for either the feelings or the expressions of them. But because he had more to eat, he had grown noticeably thicker than Etowa over the past few decades, though neither of these beings could ever be fat because it just wasn't part of their make-up to be so.

Related to the subject of time, Vini, in considering unicorns being used for time travel, was finding the idea ringing very true, almost like a bell clanging loudly in her head. And because of her gift of discernment, she might have found the idea plausible even without the fine magical dust she had breathed in from the cantaloupe seed Etowa had left on Paloma Drive, directly in her path to the mansion on a Saturday nearing the end of August—the idea from the seed equaling the clanging, which might have only been a normal ringing if it hadn't been helped along by the seed.

Generally, Etowa would have allowed things to take their course more naturally, since Vini would have come to the appropriate conclusion on her own. However, due to something Boko had just done, there was a great need for urgency in Vini recognizing the truth of time travel by unicorn.

In thinking about the issue at home later, things became clearer and clearer to Vini. She wouldn't have to research theories or work out scientific things in her non-scientific brain because, if God wanted her to travel to another time by unicorn, He would arrange the details, in the same way He had arranged for everything leading up to her finding unicorns. For all of the striving that scientists and other people did, all they really needed to do was pray and trust in God to guide them. Smiling, she recalled one of her favorite bible quotes, from Psalm 46:10, which was actually a command from God. "Be still, and know that I am God." And how much easier all aspects of life would be if people would just remember this.

God would also tell her exactly when to go on this incredible adventure, she was sure of it, because He had always made His timing clear before.

In focusing on just surrendering and letting God take control of everything—because of course He was in complete control, with nothing ever allowed to happen outside of His perfect will—she tried to apply this to the issue of demon possession. If someone close to her was truly possessed, it was still within God's will, and must be happening for some reason, maybe to help her learn something, or to test her in some way, or to get her trained for something. In thinking back to various demon encounters, upon reflection, they had seemed like training.

Again pondering whether or not Preston might be possessed, and how she might find out for sure (which she didn't have any good ideas on yet), she thought that, if he was, there must be some reason God would have allowed it. But Vini still couldn't get a clear idea if he might be. Despite the bible warning about not trusting in a brother, she kept going back and forth on considering Preston as being possessed. Opening her bible randomly, her eyes met the first part of Micah 7:5. "Put no trust in a neighbor, have no confidence in a friend..."

Mr. Galloway, Charlie? Who might it be?

Sighing, she tried to shake off the disturbing thought of someone she cared for being possessed, especially because she realized she was obsessing over the issue. But even with trying to put it aside, she still couldn't get the dream, or what happened to the horses at Plum Acres Ranch, out of her head. With regards to the horses, mostly she worried

as to how easily the same thing might happen to a human being. Plus, her dreams usually meant something in application to her life, so it almost seemed right to worry over it, or at least think about it a lot.

Vini would eventually discover that she was right to obsess on this at least a little because someone very close to her was indeed possessed, and had been for quite some time.

Chapter Nine

The Fabulous Fifties

At work on Sunday afternoon, while taking a break on the back porch, Vini and Ben again talked about time travel; and Ben mentioned how exciting he thought it would be to travel back to ancient Rome, or Egypt, or even to something in more recent history like Pearl Harbor.

“Not so good if you landed in the middle of the attack,” Vini said.

“True,” he agreed. “Plus, I would have to be really careful not to change anything. People in science fiction books are always messing up the future by doing stupid things when they travel into the past.”

Inside, after asking Vini to retrieve the sewing basket from the sewing room for her, Violet put on some old 45 RPM records that had once belonged to Mrs. Doyle. Excitedly, she told Vini, “I found a whole stack of them, along with the player, in a trunk in the attic, so I brought them down. These are all from the fifties,” she added, indicating the stack.

The mention of the fifties perked up Vini’s ears because she had just received a parcel in the mail from her grandmother containing a carefully-preserved cardigan sweater that her mother told her was worn by her grandmother in the fifties. Vini had put it aside, not thinking about it much because it wasn’t quite of a style she thought she might wear, not being particularly fond of vintage clothing.

Violet had also brought a hula hoop down from the attic, and was trying hard to give it a go; but she wasn’t much good at it. Vini, in trying to give her employer a few pointers, had a great laugh at herself to discover she wasn’t any good at it either. In the upstairs library later, she looked up hula hoops and discovered that they were invented in 1958.

Listening to songs like “Don’t Be Cruel” and “Rock Around the Clock” while she worked, it dawned on Vini that God was probably sending her messages, to let her know she would soon be traveling back in time to the fifties.

Later, she found Dave and Violet in the parlor doing the twist and the jitterbug, and talking about going to get some candy necklaces and atomic fireballs, which were evidently popular in the 1950's. This peaked Pizzo's interest, as he watched the dancing from a comfy spot on the divan, because he was extremely fond of all kinds of candy.

Although Dave and Violet hadn't been born until the sixties, they knew a lot about the fifties from their parents, aunts, and uncles. And they loved a lot of things about the 1950's like the books, games, and popular music. "The fifties were just fabulous!" Violet gushed, while dancing.

Just before leaving for the day, while carrying the sewing basket back up to the sewing room, Vini noticed a thimble in the basket that had a diamond pattern just like the one she had seen in the cloud shadow. Slightly better about picking up on messages from God than she used to be, Vini smiled as she confidently told herself, *I believe I will be going to the 1950's, and the trip is going to have something to do with a thimble.* All of the items in the sewing room had once belonged to Mrs. Doyle, and many of them, like the antique sewing basket, had even belonged to Mrs. Doyle's mother. Examining the thimble carefully and finding nothing particularly significant about it, Vini left it in the basket.

Although she felt she had enough information from God to take the trip to the fifties, she also felt the need to be cautious. Without knowing anything about time travel, such as how long the trip might take, she decided it would be a good idea to follow the same pattern she had followed when heading out on other major tasks with Tulko, that of waiting until the weekend to go.

During the week, she read up on a few things about the fifties, such as important historical events and what movies were popular. Looking both online and through several magazines she found in the mansion's libraries, she studied some of the clothing and hairstyles, from which she decided simply to wear a plain pullover short-sleeved shirt and jeans, along with her grandmother's sweater. She would also put her hair back into a headband.

How exactly the time travel would take place was a little puzzling to Vini, though she didn't stress over it, knowing that God would let her know exactly what she was supposed to do.

After praying for guidance, the answer came to her that the most appropriate thing to do would be to call a unicorn and simply ask the creature to take her to the 1950's. Since unicorns were able to communicate by thought, this shouldn't be a problem. And just like Tulko had known exactly where to go in Italy and Japan, Vini felt sure the unicorn would know exactly when and where to take her to in the fifties.

But could it be that simple? Actually, when she let God have the reins and just went along with His commands, everything about finding unicorns had been exactly that simple. All of the pieces of the puzzle had basically just fallen into her lap. *So why shouldn't this be just as easy?*

Even without Ben's comment about people in science fiction books messing things up, Vini would have known to be careful about doing things in the past that might change the future; and she reasoned that if she prayed about it, God would help her to be cautious. She also reasoned that God knew He could trust her not to do anything self-serving, like telling anyone in the past about lottery numbers of the future, or warning a family member about future stock-market crashes. Vini also knew that she couldn't do something like go back farther in time and kill Hitler as a baby, because there had to be some reason according to God's overall plan that the Holocaust needed to happen.

Since she was currently on a quest to find dragons, Vini naturally assumed that the time travel would be related to this endeavor. And remembering that the trip was going to have something to do with a thimble, Vini smiled in thinking it rather odd that thimbles might have something to do with dragons. However, upon reflection, she didn't know why she should find it odd because clocks, shoes, sand dollars, and dandelions had all led to her finding the first unicorn.

Early Saturday, Vini walked to the mansion but didn't enter the side gate as she might normally have done. Instead, she continued down the side street and turned the corner at the alley to make her way to a spot just outside the back gate. In Vini's part of the neighborhood, she felt the houses were too close together to call a unicorn unobserved, so she had decided to use the mansion as her starting point; and the very back of the property was the most secluded part of the estate. Through a thin

split in the back hedge and through the iron fence, she could just see Violet already up and about, sweeping a balcony on the second floor.

This being the last weekend in August and still fairly warm, Vini didn't really need her grandmother's sweater; but she wore it anyway because she wanted to do the best she could with fitting into the time period of the fifties.

Upon calling the unicorn, when the shimmering creature appeared only inches from her, Vini was slightly surprised to discover that this was the same unicorn that had come to her the very first time, one that had eyes very like those of her late grandfather on her mother's side. She had expected the one that had appeared to her most recently, with eyes resembling those of Mrs. Doyle.

Following her plan, Vini simply told the unicorn by thought, *My trip has something to do with the fifties. I'm pretty sure you know exactly where and when.*

Almost instantly, she received a soft answer that sounded as much like gently-flowing water as it did a quiet voice. *Yes.*

Somehow Vini knew that she would need to get onto the unicorn to travel. On instinct, she hopped on just as she might hop aboard Tulko, whose wind power always helped her to mount without aid of a stirrup or a saddle horn. In a similar manner, Vini found herself lifted aboard the unicorn, but without feeling anything like a burst of wind.

Seated on the creature also felt much different than being atop Tulko, whose power firmly held her legs in place, and protected her from any volatility of his speedy travel. While she still felt very secure, the aura surrounding the unicorn was completely still, and she felt nothing at all beneath her, as though she might be floating. While she didn't particularly think she needed to hang on, just as she often did when riding Tulko, she buried her hands into the mane of the unicorn. Though again feeling nothing to the touch, the "holding on" did give her an added sense of security; and the sensation grew to encompass her whole body, almost as though she was being held in some sort of gentle force field. And while she couldn't feel anything by touch, her hand was definitely meeting some resistance, but something invisible, that might have no particular substance, but rather contained some sort of energy, like maybe pure energy, of a sort that was definitely wholesome and wholly good.

In anticipation of something extraordinary about to happen, Vini closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Opening her eyes a moment later, she discovered that, while it felt as though they were standing still, they had definitely started on their journey because she could see the movement of the unicorn below her, which mostly resembled a horse running at a gentle gallop.

While what was happening was extraordinary, connecting it to something familiar like riding a horse also made it somehow mundane, as though perfectly normal and natural, though “the mundane” to Vini was often completely wonderful, as it should be because the events of everyday life should be held to be joyful. While some people had difficulty comprehending how both thrill and commonplace could happen at the same time, Vini understood.

The feeling she was experiencing while time-traveling would have been difficult for her to explain. She simply felt incredibly calm, happy, and able to breathe more easily than at any other time in her life. And what she was able to see was absolutely spectacular, colors like those in a rainbow, but infinitely more of them, streaking along beside, above, and below them as they made their way backwards in time.

As the unicorn continued to gallop, though still feeling no movement at all, not even a whisper of a breeze, Vini marveled at the world changing around them, like shapes and colors melting and reforming, then melting and reforming again.

Traveling without feeling movement, she found it impossible to tell how much time was passing, either real time or time-travel time. Except that the whole journey ended up feeling like maybe just under three minutes to Vini, which was how long she could hold her breath under water. Of course, she hadn’t held her breath when traveling; but she was familiar with three minutes on a stopwatch. Her mother also used a three-minute egg timer quite often to make soft-boiled eggs. And just before a three-minute egg timer in her brain would have run out, was when she noticed that all movement around her stopped, and the unicorn was standing completely still.

As far as the journey, since Vini hadn’t felt any movement that could equate to her brain telling her she had moved any actual distance, she found herself wondering how many miles they might have traveled. The unicorn could tell what Vini was thinking because he could hear

human thoughts fairly clearly, especially their questions and wonderings. However, because he knew that they had traveled miles so great in number that a human brain simply would not have been able to comprehend the distance, he didn't try to explain anything to her. *Why bother?*

Chapter Ten

Frances, Age Thirteen

They ended up just outside the back gate to Doyle Mansion, as though they had never moved; except that they obviously had moved through time because, while the mansion was unmistakable, a lot of things about the estate were very different. There were no photinia bushes at the rear of the property; in their place was a row of euonymus. Two large hawthorn bushes sat either side of the back gate, which was also something different, along with the gate, not being nearly as tall as the one Vini was familiar with. The fence surrounding the property was also not as tall, and many of the hedges and ivies along the fence line were quite different. The gate was also shaded by a mulberry tree that wouldn't be there in the future.

Slipping off of the unicorn, she again felt nothing other than a slight resistance, possibly energy of some sort, which allowed her some control in the action of getting down. No sooner had her feet met the ground than the unicorn vanished, which didn't surprise or alarm her at all. When she finished her task and needed to return to home, she would simply again call one.

Peering through a slightly bare spot in the hedge, while trying to stay concealed from anyone inside the fence, Vini carefully studied the house and grounds. There was a different garden shed, in a slightly different spot. From this angle, she could see past the house and into the front yard, which enabled her to see about half of the gazebo, which was a much larger one than would be there in the future. *How strange.* Vini hadn't known that Mr. and Mrs. Doyle had replaced the older gazebo when it was damaged during a windstorm about five years before Vini was born. As far as the trees surrounding the mansion, many of the oak trees were recognizable, being only slightly smaller than in Vini's time. Of course, the fruit trees were all different in her time, having much shorter lives than the oaks.

Since the unicorn had brought her to the exact spot she left from in the future, Vini wondered if the mansion in the fifties somehow held the answer to finding dragons. But maybe the answer was lost over the years, in the same way the estate lost its older shed and gazebo. If it didn't hold the exact answer, she felt it likely that the property would hold at least a piece of the puzzle. Intent on her search for dragons, Vini would never have imagined that God might have brought her to the 1950's for quite another reason, nearly completely unrelated to her search for dragons, but an extremely important reason nonetheless.

Being flexible, Vini knew she would be able to adapt if she happened to encounter something she wasn't expecting; except that she had no idea what to expect, other than maybe to find a dragon. But it almost seemed as though that would have been too easy—for a unicorn to lead her right to a dragon, or the answer as to how to find one—which was probably why she suddenly got the idea into her head that she might be here for some other reason. *Or not*, she thought, trying to talk herself out of the idea.

However, she wasn't particularly surprised when a little voice in the back of her mind suddenly said, *This probably isn't related to dragons at all.*

While she hoped the little voice was wrong, her brain responded, *Whatever; if it is or if it isn't, I'll just go with the flow.*

From the position of the sun, Vini could tell it was obviously early morning; and she reasoned that it was probably very close to the same time of day that she had left in the future. It also seemed to be about the same time of year as when she had left; at least, it felt the same. The weather was still somewhat warm, but with a hint of fall approaching in the slightly cool breeze that was rustling the leaves of the mulberry tree. While her sweater wasn't making her sweat, she thought that, with the warming of the day, it might well become somewhat uncomfortable.

In wondering exactly what she was supposed to do, Vini was determined to be patient and just wait, to see what might happen. She was confident that God would lead her. However, while waiting, she did meander along the alley to the corner of the property in order to view the side street. The pavement looked different than that of the future, much lighter in color.

Trying to decide if she wanted to walk around to the front of the property, Vini suddenly spied a girl that looked about her own age just turning the corner into the alley from the street on the other side of the estate. As the girl made her way towards her, Vini, after nonchalantly pausing to pick up a leaf, then a pebble, walked slowly towards the back gate. Gazing up at a mockingbird sitting on a branch of the mulberry tree, Vini waited to make eye contact until the girl was nearly to her position.

While she ended up being surprised, Vini was not shocked to find herself face to face with Mrs. Doyle, but a much younger version than the one Vini was familiar with, of course. Actually, they weren't face to face in a literal sense because the teenage Mrs. Doyle was a good six inches taller than Vini.

Vini's brain had only needed about three seconds to work out exactly why the girl was so familiar because Frances Harrison looked a lot like the pictures Vini had seen in the photo albums she and Violet had looked through, the only difference being that her hair was currently pulled back into a ponytail, which it hadn't been in any of the photographs.

"Oh, hi, I didn't think anyone would be here this early on a Saturday," Frances told Vini, her voice sounding a little nervous for some reason. "I'm Frances, by the way."

So it's a Saturday here too, Vini thought, while her brain scrambled with her reply. "Uh...Marie," Vini said, as she quickly thought to use her middle name.

Feeling a need to explain what she might be doing in the alley behind the mansion, Vini hurried to say, "I'm from out of town, and I was curious about this mansion, so I thought I'd walk all around it."

"I'm curious too," Frances replied. "Actually, I'm being nosy. The Doyles are having some sort of renovations done. Mountains of dirt, just loads and loads of it, are being hauled off by trucks at night. It's like they're excavating."

Really?" Vini answered, peering through the hedges, where she did notice a couple of piles of dirt in the garden that she hadn't thought strange or out of place the first time she looked in.

"For about the last three weeks," Frances confirmed. "But I can't tell anything from the front of the property, so I thought I would come

and see if I could tell anything from the back. I live about three blocks from here, on Redbird Lane.”

“I don’t know the roads very well,” Vini replied. “I came with my parents for a reunion, and we’re staying with my aunt and cousins in one of those row houses over on Avenue D.” Knowing her town history, Vini felt it was safe to mention one of the original streets, since for sure it would have been there in the 1950’s.

Also peering through the hedges, Frances said, “It’s not just the dirt. They’ve had loads of lumber delivered. So they’re not just excavating, they’re building something too. Who knows what they’re making in there.”

As far as the excavation, although Vini realized they were probably digging out for the subbasement library, she once again thought of dragons; and her hopeful brain imagined that the Doyle family might be creating a secret lair for a dragon. However, in thinking this over, she quickly ruled out the dragon scenario, especially since the digging had only been going on for about three weeks. Even if a dragon lair was smaller than the subbasement library, they would still need much more than three weeks of digging for it to be sizeable enough to hold a dragon. And she had been brought here to this time, not to some future time when a dragon lair might be completed.

Vini was correct that the subbasement library was being dug, secretly because the Doyles didn’t believe neighbors needed to know. And since they had construction people in the family who knew how to do things properly, they didn’t feel the need for all kinds of costly and time-consuming permits and whatnots. While they were bending the rules, they actually didn’t think they were doing anything harmful, in building a place to keep important items safe, mainly religious artifacts and books. As far as time, Vini would find out later that the whole of the excavation and construction would take over six years to complete.

“The school term just started, and the Doyle’s son, Gerard, is in my class,” Frances said. “But he’s so full of himself. I can’t stand him. That’s why I haven’t asked about the renovations. I’m not particularly friends with him.”

Vini almost choked with laughter to hear the young Mrs. Doyle describing the love of her life. With Frances looking at her somewhat quizzically, Vini covered up the laugh with a cough.

“So your cousins didn’t want to come out with you today?” Frances asked.

Again thinking quickly, Vini answered, “Patty and Maryann are younger than I am, ten and eleven, so I wanted some time to myself. And I was hoping maybe to find someone my own age to hang out with.”

“Hang out with’...that’s an interesting expression,” Frances said slowly, as if considering.

“Well, I’m from Illinois,” Vini replied.

In being fixated on the mysterious work being done at the mansion, Frances didn’t give the oddity much thought. Shifting position along the fence line and again peering through the bushes, she said, “As far as dirt being hauled off, the mansion already has a large basement. I went to a birthday party there once, Gerard’s eighth I think. We played *Hide and Seek*, so I got to see the basement. It’s already really big, so there’s no reason to make a bigger one. I wondered if maybe they were digging a new root cellar.” Noticing that Vini was looking at her a little strangely, somewhat intently, but also in an amused manner, as though she might be about to laugh at any moment, she added, “I know, I shouldn’t be so nosy. My mom told me not to be nosy.”

In truth, Vini was fondly remembering Mrs. Doyle and was having a little trouble keeping it under wraps how incredibly happy she was to see her again. The look on her face might also have been likened to a blissfully goofy expression. “I don’t think you’re nosy,” she answered. “There’s nothing wrong with being curious. I’m curious too. In fact, I have an idea. I’d love to see the house closer up. If they’re home, maybe we could pay them a visit.”

“Oh no, we couldn’t do that,” Frances replied.

“Why not?”

“Well, it just doesn’t seem right. I think they would probably guess we’re just being nosy.”

“But I have a good reason for a visit,” Vini said. “I’m collecting buttons for charity. Surely, people living in a house like that will have some to spare.”

Vini had thought ahead before traveling into the past. Although her task had something to do with a thimble, she didn’t feel she could just go around asking for people to show her or give her their thimbles.

However, since thimbles were often connected to buttons in the realm of sewing, she had come up with a plan in her brain that to her seemed perfectly plausible.

“A businessman where I live will contribute a quarter to our local hospital for every button collected,” she told Frances.

“Wow, that’s a lot of money!” Frances replied.

“Yes, he’s very generous.” Vini had almost said a dollar, and was glad she had caught herself, since a dollar for each button would have equated to a tremendous amount of money in the 1950’s.

Frances was still skeptical about the proposed visit, until Vini said, “This might be a perfect way for you to find out something about the work being done.”

This served to persuade Frances, who made her way with Vini around the fence line toward the front of the house. However, as they were passing the side gate, Vini happened to notice Gerard in the vegetable garden. He had just started digging up sweet potatoes with a spade.

“Hello! Hi there!” Vini called loudly to Gerard, the boldness of which startled Frances to the point that she actually made a move in obvious timidity to try to hide behind Vini.

“I thought we were going to go to the front gate, and that we’d ring the front doorbell,” she said in a hushed tone, peeking nervously around Vini as she saw Gerard coming toward the side gate.

Vini was also somewhat startled, not about her own boldness, but because she never would have thought Mrs. Doyle timid about anything. As far as Vini knew, she had always spoken her mind. She was a woman capable of taking charge, and standing up for what she believed in. Mrs. Doyle had even stood up to muggers once. Now, Vini wondered if the nervousness she had heard in Frances’ voice during their initial greeting might have been shyness. Knowing that Mrs. Doyle was a somewhat reserved woman, in a stately and old-fashioned sort of way, Vini was starting to get the idea that perhaps she had once been shy.

In truth, Frances at age thirteen was both shy and nervous. However, she was not only surprised that this girl, Marie, would just loudly call out to someone she didn’t know, Frances also admired her for it.

Smiling a little sheepishly (because he too was somewhat shy) as he neared and opened the gate, Gerard said, “Hello, Fran...ces.” He said her name very slowly, in two long and drawn-out syllables, which Vini thought very strange.

“This is Marie,” Frances said quietly, and in rather stoic manner, while casting her eyes down.

“Hello, I’m Gerard,” he said to the smiling Vini, while also shaking the hand that she offered.

Since both Frances and Gerard were staring at each other somewhat awkwardly, Vini decided to take charge. “I’m just visiting from Illinois, and I’m collecting buttons for charity. Do you by any chance have any extras?”

“Oh plenty, come on in,” Gerard answered in a friendly manner, while opening the gate wider and also glancing somewhat warily at Frances who seemed to have a somewhat sour look on her face. At this point, Vini could only wonder at the history between the two.

As he led them up to the house, Gerard added, “My parents aren’t home right now, but I know where Mother keeps the buttons in her sewing room.”

In drawing closer to the mansion, Vini noticed slight differences in the paint colors of the trim work, along with a balcony railing on the second floor that was not the same as in the future. *Likely replaced from either rotting out, or damage from a storm*, she thought.

Gerard brought them in through the kitchen, which was very different than it would be in the future. The refrigerator was a much older model, of course. The counters were different. However, the cabinets were the same, though perhaps a little less scuffed and worn. Vini had always thought the cabinets were fairly old, but had never really thought to ask Mrs. Doyle or Violet about them. There was no microwave; though already invented, they hadn’t become widely available yet.

Following Gerard up the main stairs to the second-floor landing, Vini paused to admire the laundry chute, which was uncovered, but would be concealed behind a large painting in the future because Mrs. Doyle never used it.

With Frances and Gerard looking questioningly at her, Vini said, “My house doesn’t have one. I just think they’re pretty nifty.”

Having never heard anyone in their area use the word “nifty” when describing anything common inside someone’s house, while they didn’t say anything, both Frances and Gerard thought this Marie’s way of putting things was a little odd.

When Gerard stopped to tie his shoelace that had come undone, Vini automatically started up to the third floor.

Straightening up after the tying, Gerard asked, “How’d you know the sewing room is on the third floor?”

Thinking quickly, Vini replied, “Aren’t all sewing rooms on the highest floors of houses, because the light is better for sewing? People need good light to sew.” She didn’t know if this was true or not, but it sounded good.

“Well we wouldn’t put the sewing room in the attic,” Gerard somewhat skeptically answered, afterwards adding, “I thought people in Illinois, or the Northern part of the country in general, had different accents than people here. You sound like you might have grown up just down the street.”

“Well, my mom and dad both grew up near here,” Vini answered, as smoothly as possible. However, in realizing that she probably wasn’t doing as good a job of fitting in as she might have hoped, she suddenly became nervous.

Her nervousness was quickly dispelled by Frances, who smiled and linked arms with her to climb to the third floor, while saying, “Even if you didn’t have roots here, I think you’d fit right in.” And she meant every word. Indeed, Frances already thought of this visitor as a sort of kindred spirit.

In the sewing room, Gerard sorted out a pile of buttons totaling about twenty-five from his mother’s button box. “These are from old shirts so I know she won’t miss them.”

Admiring an old sewing basket, slightly larger than Mrs. Doyle’s in the future, open on a table beside the sewing machine, Vini noticed three thimbles. Bending over to look closely at them, she said, “My mother collects thimbles, of all kinds.” In not seeing anything out of the ordinary regarding the thimbles, she didn’t particularly think these three might have anything to do with why she had traveled here.

“Do you want something to keep the buttons in?” Gerard asked. “I can get you a paper bag from the kitchen?”

“No, thank you,” Vini answered. “I’ll just keep them in my pants’ pocket. Please, thank your mother for me,” she remembered to add, “for this important contribution.”

As they were heading back down the stairs, smiling and looking sideways at Frances, Vini said, “We have houses like this in Illinois, but people don’t usually let other people look around inside them. I wonder...might we take a short tour?”

“Sure,” Gerard answered. “The house was originally built in 1890; but it’s been updated a few times since then, mostly the plumbing and electricity.”

“Older houses like this usually have libraries,” Vini said. “I love books. Do you have a library, by any chance?”

“Yes,” Gerard replied, and he was only too happy to show his guests the enormous room.

Frances hadn’t seen the library when she came to Gerard’s eighth birthday party. Once inside, she stared wide-eyed and open-mouthed for nearly two minutes. Vini tried to put on the same sense of awe. Indeed, the library was much as it would look in the future, perhaps a few less books and artifacts, but just as large and splendid. Vini recognized a couple of the tapestries and most of the furniture. The enormous globe she was very familiar with was already there as well. The ceiling fans in the mansion were much different, running on long belts, which Vini found very interesting.

While she had remembered to act properly stunned by the library, Vini ended up making one little mistake—when casually saying something about mythology and folklore books, she accidentally called Frances, Mrs. Doyle. Quickly catching the slip, she coughed as a cover while saying, “I mean, what do Mr. and Mrs. Doyle do for a living?”

The blunder evidently wasn’t particularly noticeable because Frances mainly looked impassive, and Gerard simply said, “Well, my mother doesn’t work. My father does historical research mainly in the area of religion; he travels a lot. He’s also an antiques dealer. He acquires things from all over the world for private collectors. When he’s home, he guest lectures at the university.”

“My dad does something similar,” Frances offered, “but his specialty is nautical history. Except he doesn’t deal in antiques; he just writes, lectures, and teaches.”

“Oh, how interesting,” Vini replied. “One of my uncles likes to build those wooden model ships.”

“My dad does that too,” Frances said. “He’s built six so far.”

As they were leaving the library, Vini noticed a newspaper on one of the tables. Sidling closer while trying not to be obvious, out of the corner of her eye, she searched for a date. Though she missed the exact day, from her angle and the quick glance, she could just make out August and 1955.

She had thought it was probably August, as it was in her own time, because the weather felt so much the same. Now, she was extremely happy to know the exact year, though she was chiding herself somewhat for not doing more research before coming. However, she was glad she had done some because she was able to vow in her mind to be very careful about mentioning things that were history to her, but that hadn’t happened yet in this time. For instance, Frances and Gerard wouldn’t know that James Dean was going to die in a car crash the very next month. Of course, in knowing this herself, Vini couldn’t take action to prevent his death, or any other tragic events, because she had to be careful not to change the future by changing the past. She also reminded herself that they wouldn’t know anything about Sputnik, which Vini recalled from her history class at school as being in 1957.

When looking at a tapestry in the hallway, unused to being called Marie, Vini at first didn’t hear Frances calling to her.

“We’re heading to the parlor,” Frances called again, slightly more loudly.

“Oh, sorry,” Vini answered, “it’s just such a beautiful tapestry.”

After a peek into both the parlor and the music room on the first floor, Frances suggested a tour of the basement, to which Gerard replied somewhat uneasily, “Oh, um...well, there’s nothing much down there to see; plus, we’re having some work done, drainage, so there’s a lot of dirt.”

Even Vini could tell that Gerard was being secretive, though she was able to conceal her disappointment better than Frances, who, through pursed lips and narrowed eyes, gave him an almost dirty look.

While they might not have gleaned any information about the excavations, Vini did see something very interesting on the first floor, in the form of an extra door right next to the one to the basement that she

was familiar with in the future house. The strange door, which had a glass doorknob but no lock, was narrower than the one to the basement. The exact spot in Doyle Mansion as Vini knew it was simply a wood-paneled wall upon which hung a small barometer. Committing the extra door to memory, which wasn't difficult, Vini also made a mental note to look at the wall after returning to her own time period, and perhaps ask Violet about it. In never having looked closely at the architectural drawings of the mansion, housed in the subbasement library, Vini couldn't imagine what the door might lead to. Perhaps it was just a closet that had been shut up for some reason.

"My house is big too, but not nearly this large," Frances remarked, as they headed toward the kitchen again. "It must be a pain to keep clean. I mean, where would you even begin?"

Being very familiar with cleaning this very house, Vini answered quickly. "You start at the top and work your way down, because dirt works its way down from top to bottom. So start with the ceiling fans and the high cobwebby corners; then do the tops of bookshelves and doorways; then move down to the lamps and table tops, and so on."

Since Mrs. Doyle had been the one to teach her this method of cleaning, Vini again reminded herself to be cautious, and refrained from saying anything more specific on the subject. She did however add, "Well, that's the way I do it when I help my mom with the cleaning. But I guess some kids nowadays don't have to do chores."

"I don't know any kids that don't have chores," Frances said, almost unbelievably.

"Me neither," Gerard agreed with her. "In fact, I have so many chores, sometimes I can't even take a breath."

Frances smiled at this as she elaborated. "We all have chores. My sister and I usually help our mother; and my two brothers help Dad in the yard, and with working on the car, and with fixing and building stuff in the workshop." Frances' father had actually built some of their furniture; and her brothers had helped, which had enabled them to learn some good woodworking skills.

Smiling at Frances, Gerard said, "I just helped my father build that bookcase in the music room."

"Wow!" Frances replied, admiringly. "It's really beautiful."

Neither Frances nor Gerard would have been able to imagine that some kids in the future wouldn't have chores, a great disservice done to them by parents who, while pampering and babying their children, and trying to be their friends instead of their parents, were teaching them to be lazy, while promoting the unhealthy attitude of entitlement.

"I guess I was thinking about a few spoiled kids at my school that don't seem to have much to do," Vini said.

Leading the visitors to the side gate, Gerard told Frances, "If you ever want to borrow books sometime from the library, just let me know."

"Thanks," Frances replied. "I might take you up on that."

Giving both girls a big smile (but Frances a bigger one than Vini), Gerard said, "It was nice to meet you, Marie."

"Same here," Vini replied.

Walking along the side street, as soon as they were well out of earshot of Gerard, who was again digging sweet potatoes, Vini said, "I'm sorry you didn't get to find anything out about the renovations."

"That's okay, I really enjoyed seeing the library," Frances said. A moment later, she added excitedly, "And he said I could borrow books sometime."

Chapter Eleven

Buttons and Thimbles

They had almost reached Paloma Drive when Frances suddenly said, "I have an idea. I want you to meet my friend, Ellie, if you have time."

"Sure," Vini replied. "I don't have anything else particular to do today."

Again linking arms with Vini, Frances did an about-face to return to the alley running behind the mansion, which led to Morningside Drive, then on to Pine Siskin Circle where her friend lived.

As they walked, Vini felt a stir of emotions, in fondly remembering her former employer and friend. Frances was very recognizable not only by her physical features but also in her easy manner and lovely personality. When she mentioned that she ran track at school, Vini told Frances that she was on her school's water polo team.

At one point, Vini actually teared up when remembering Mrs. Doyle, but covered by saying, "I have allergies; they make my eyes water and my nose run."

With Frances offering her a handkerchief from her pocket, embroidered with flowers and the letter F, Vini said, "Thank you. Oh, this is pretty."

"Keep it," Frances offered when Vini tried to return it after dabbing her eyes. "Then you'll have something to remember me by when you go back home. I have plenty of handkerchiefs."

Vini, of course, would have no trouble remembering Frances all of her life.

Ellie Franklin, like Gerard, was one of Frances' classmates; and it took Vini a couple of minutes to place her, whereupon, she realized that this was Mrs. Doyle's friend in the future, Mrs. Ellis. Though Vini had met her several times, and had known they were friends from childhood, she had never known Mrs. Ellis' first name; and she almost laughed (covering it up with a cough) to realize that when Ellie Franklin would

meet and marry Walter Ellis in the future, her name would be Ellie Ellis.

Ellie's mother was baking in the kitchen when Frances and "Marie" arrived, but broke off work to rummage through her sewing box in order to contribute about fifteen buttons to Vini's charity endeavor.

After asking if her mother needed help with anything in the kitchen, and upon receiving a negative reply, Ellie led Frances and Vini to her bedroom.

Since the day was turning off somewhat warm, and the Franklins' house, like most in the fifties, didn't have air conditioning, Vini took off her cardigan, but buttoned it again in order to have it lie fairly flat against her shoulders and back as she loosely tied the arms of it around her neck. She had seen this in a photo in one of the magazines from the fifties she had looked through, and she thought it a first-rate way to carry a sweater or light jacket when not needing to be worn.

In looking at some of Ellie's belongings, Vini again felt a need to be careful about what she might accidentally say. She knew that the slinky had been invented by this time, but not the hula hoop. In addition to toys and gadgets, she was of course careful not to say anything about TV shows she liked. And she knew to be cautious when mentioning even older movies because *Rear Window* and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* were both out, but not *The Fly*. Popular books too, even ones of the 1950's, could be tricky when trying to remember the dates. For example, *Charlotte's Web* had been published, but not *Old Yeller* or *Flowers for Algernon*.

When Vini mentioned that she had meet Gerard and that he had given them a tour of Doyle Mansion, seeming surprised, Ellie said to Frances, "I thought you were avoiding him because of the name thing."

"Marie wanted to see the house," Frances replied.

"What name thing?" Vini asked.

"It's nothing," Frances hurried to say, while shaking her head.

From the girls' casual conversation, Vini next discovered that Ellie and her brother had been pestering their parents for a color television to replace the family's black and white one. "But I don't think they are going to budge," Ellie said dejectedly. "They say the one we have is plenty fine."

“We’re not getting one either,” Frances said. “I think my dad even used the word, never.”

Ellie had several odd-looking leaflet-style books on her bed containing something known as S&H Green Stamps, which completely fascinated Vini.

“You act like you’ve never seen them before,” Ellie said.

In truth, Vini had never seen them before; nor could she remember having heard of them because she didn’t particularly remember the time her grandmother told her (as a little girl) about these trading stamps people got when making purchases at grocery stores, gas stations, and other such places, that could be redeemed for all kinds of things like household goods and toys.

“Not very many stores in my area offer them,” Vini said as a cover.

“Well, after my mother fills the books, she lets my brother and I take turns picking things out,” Ellie explained, “as long as we’ve done all our chores and been helpful around the house in other ways too, like offering to do extra without being asked.”

Frances was flipping through the *Ideabook* that was basically a catalog of what was available to trade the stamps for.

“I have enough for either skates or a set of mystery novels,” Ellie said.

“I’d get the books,” Vini offered.

“Me too,” Frances agreed.

Evidently, unlike Ellie, Frances and her siblings didn’t get to pick things from the catalogs because Frances’ mom used their stamps to get things for the house, like dinnerware. “That’s how she got our waffle iron,” Frances said.

In looking at the catalog, Vini noticed a hairdryer similar to those in beauty shops, but a home model that might sit on counter or table and that a person could back their chair up to. “How handy this would be,” she said.

“I wouldn’t have enough stamps for that,” Ellie said, “plus, my mom already has one of those. If you lived around here, you could borrow it sometimes.”

As Frances and Vini were invited to have an early lunch with Ellie and her mother, Frances, needing to check in with her own mother, phoned home.

“Do you need to check in at your cousins’ house?” Frances asked, after setting down the receiver.

“No, I told them I’d be gone all day,” Vini replied.

Both Ellie and Frances always had to check in when gone from home for any length of time. While they thought it a little strange that Marie was so independent, they chalked it up to her being a little older than they; and with age, naturally, comes a little more freedom.

They had wonderful leftover turkey tetrazzini, with a fruit cocktail salad on the side. Evidently, Ellie’s brother and father were off together doing something for the day, so Vini didn’t get to meet them before she and Frances left just after helping to clear away the lunch plates. Ellie and her mother both refused the offers of Frances and Vini to help with washing dishes, which the hosts set to doing just after seeing their guests to the front door.

Heading down the street, Frances already had their next destination in mind. “We can get more buttons at my house, and I want you to meet my family,” she said.

“Sounds like a good plan,” Vini happily agreed. Since she was enjoying spending time with Frances, she basically was in no hurry for it to end. However, she did remind herself that she was here in the fifties for some sort of important reason, so she tried to keep alert to anything God might be telling her to do.

While going in the direction to again reach Paloma Drive, they took a different route than the one they had traveled to reach Ellie’s house, one that took them across a large field that was part of what remained of an old farm, most of which had been sold off to make various residential neighborhoods. While the farm no longer had livestock, the owners did occasionally plant small crops, and this particular field did have about twenty rows of scraggly-looking corn planted in one half of it, the rest being weedy and overgrown. Fringed on all sides by trees and wild shrubs, the field was very secluded.

Picking their way through the weeds—with Frances chatting about liking fanciful books about witches and ogres as much as mystery books, and saying something about looking for gnomes in the garden—they had reached about the middle of the field when Vini basically stopped listening because she suddenly sensed something, something incredibly dangerous and evil. Quickly looking around, she saw a pack

of about twenty demons appear in the field behind them, materializing seemingly out of thin air just near the tree line.

While Frances didn't notice, Vini, aside from seeing them, could definitely feel their presence, due to having had previous encounters with them. Once familiar with certain sensations, like the ugly feeling in the gut and the chills that crawl up the shoulders and into the nape of the neck, a person would always be in tune to the presence of these horrible creatures, especially being this close in proximity.

After spotting them, Vini's eyes flew quickly forward again because she didn't want Frances to look around. She hadn't brought her dagger with her because it definitely would have been too conspicuous. But it wouldn't have done much good anyway against this many demons. In tuning in to all of her surroundings, Vini couldn't sense any creatures nearby that might have been able to help them, such as wind horses. Tulko was not even born until the eighties. Plus, even if he had been alive in the fifties, he was not assigned to protect Vini until her own time, so he wouldn't have been anywhere nearby.

Without help, and with no other ideas popping into her brain, Vini calmly called a unicorn.

In one swift look backwards, before focusing her gaze forwards again, she saw the magnificent creature standing between the girls and the demon pack that had only advanced about twenty yards towards them. However, even with the glance being brief, Vini was able to tell that this was a different unicorn, slightly smaller and a little more golden in color, than either of the two she was familiar with. Of course, she couldn't tell, and would never know, but this unicorn had eyes resembling Frances' late great-aunt on her father's side.

She didn't need to tell Frances not to look because she still hadn't noticed anything going on behind her. Vini of course knew not to look directly at the creature when it was about to light up. She did however close her eyes.

Following the flash of light, which lasted less than two seconds, the girls were knocked flat on their faces by a sudden intense burst of wind. Looking behind her, Vini couldn't even see the demons that the unicorn had dispatched because they had already completely disintegrated, as though melted, with what might have been left of them simply blown

away like dust in the wind. Nor was the unicorn still in sight, having vanished after swiftly performing its task.

Stunned for a few moments after the fall, when Frances and Vini were able to get to their feet again, Frances, somewhat pale, said, “What on earth was that? The shortest storm ever maybe, with a flash of lightning and wind; but I didn’t hear any thunder.”

Straightening her sweater about her shoulders, Vini replied, “Maybe something like a dust devil, but more powerful. I think I heard a weather person one time use the term, microburst. Maybe that’s what it was.”

Helping Frances get brushed off, Vini suddenly sensed something else, but this time not evil. It was something more like a thunderbird or a wind horse, but not exactly like either, so it was a presence that felt similar but not familiar. Whatever it was only remained nearby for a few seconds, after which, Vini couldn’t feel it anymore.

For what they had just been through, Vini felt remarkably calm; and as they continued on their way, it was almost as though nothing had happened. And she wasn’t even surprised that their slightly dusty clothes were the only damage from the demon encounter, because she had complete trust that God would always carry her through any adversities.

The field they crossed put them at the far end of Paloma Drive where they would end up walking the whole street—and passing not only the mansion but also where Vini’s house would eventually be built in the future—on their way to Blessing Boulevard that would take them over to Redbird Lane where Frances lived.

Drinking in everything with her eyes, Vini loved every minute of walking down Paloma Drive.

Noticing, Frances remarked, “I’ve never seen anyone so interested in a neighborhood before.”

The street was quite different. One of the cross streets, Porter Avenue, would be renamed in Vini’s time (actually a couple of years before she was born) as Martin Luther King Jr Boulevard.

Mr. Galloway’s house was just being built, by a family named Templeton, and was nearly complete. The front yard had only couple of flowerbeds and a handful of bushes planted so far, with not much other landscaping done as yet. The gazebo hadn’t yet been built. While the

estate did have some trees originally, none of the shrubs and trees Mr. Galloway would later make topiaries out of had been planted. This seemed right to Vini since she knew that a lot of these types of plants generally didn't live so many decades. None of the fruit trees were there.

The twin elm trees either side of Mr. Galloway's front sidewalk, which was now just a stepping-stone path, had recently been planted. They were very small, only just a little taller than Vini, but she had a clear picture in her mind of the towering elms of her time, which provided nice shade and a good habitat for birds and squirrels.

Seeing a man on the front porch who looked to be the owner, Vini wanted to talk to him, though Frances didn't particular want to.

"Will you wait for me if I go talk to him?" Vini asked.

"Oh, I'll go with you, I guess," Frances somewhat reluctantly answered.

After Mr. Templeton introduced himself, Vini replied with, "Marie and Frances. What a beautiful property," she added. "I love the shrubs, especially the viburnum and cotoneaster."

Since this was a girl who seemed to know her way around bushes, Mr. Templeton said, "We're going to plant a lot more. Do you have any suggestions?"

Since she didn't think it would change the future too much, Vini smiled and said, "Yew trees. They're just pretty much perfect and all-around wonderful, and they live a really long time, so the people living in the neighborhood in the future will be able to enjoy them too."

"If we're even here in the future," he answered a little sourly. Evidently, Mr. Templeton was a man extremely worried about bombs; and he told the girls he was thinking about building a fallout shelter in his back yard.

As they said goodbye and moved on down the block, Vini noticed many oak trees in the neighborhood that she was familiar with, being similar in shape, but noticeably not as large as they would be in the future. Some were already extremely large though, and she thought astonishingly how old the oaks in her time must be, and how much they must have lived through in their lifetimes.

Vini's house was not there, of course, because it had been built in recent years. The estate upon which her house and many others would

be built was there, upon which sat a beautiful house that Vini knew was destined to burn down in the future. Thankfully, no one was killed in the fire; but the family was devastated to lose everything. She knew not to try to warn the people, both for fear of changing the future and because she knew some things were meant to happen for very important reasons. For one thing, her house wouldn't have even been built in the future if this home hadn't burned because the estate wouldn't have been sold to the developer who bought the one next to it as well. If both properties hadn't been for sale at the same time, the developer wouldn't have bothered buying the one because he was looking for a larger chunk of land to develop.

No we can't tamper with the past, Vini reminded herself. *I'm here only for something to do with a thimble*. But even as this thought flitted through her brain, she had a revelation that this wasn't completely true.

The button-collecting put me in the right place at the right time to save Frances, she realized. *So that's why I needed to come here. If Mrs. Doyle had died in the past from a demon attack, she wouldn't have done all the wonderful things she was meant to do in her life, including hiring me as her housekeeper*.

When they reached Frances' craftsmen-style house, though her father and brothers were not at home, Vini was able to meet both Mrs. Harrison and Annabelle.

Upon hearing about the buttons-for-charity project, Frances' mother, a very tiny woman, led the girls into the study where her sewing table was set up in one corner. Taking a box from a shelf above the sewing table, she began sorting out buttons. When Mrs. Harrison sent Frances to get two more buttons that she knew were on her dresser, Vini suddenly got a very odd sensation, as though Pizzo might be around, except that she knew he couldn't be because he hadn't been born yet in the fifties. According to Louetta, the little troll wasn't nearly that old.

The sensation actually came from a girl puck troll standing on a shelf just above where the button box had been. Deena had lived with the Harrisons for several years and was specifically attached to Frances' father who was the only one of the family, at present, that knew of her existence. Since building ship models was a very artistic endeavor, and puck trolls held great admiration for artistic people, this was what had drawn Deena, who often spent long hours watching Mr. Harrison build

the models. The opposite corner of the room from the sewing table held a large desk upon which one of Mr. Harrison's model ships was currently under construction.

Since she was mostly concealed by a stack of sewing patterns, Vini might not have noticed Deena hiding on the shelf, because she had only looked around in sensing the slight presence of the puck troll, which actually surprised Vini a little because she hadn't particularly realized until now that Pizzo had a presence that could be felt, like that of Tulko or Lyydu.

In spotting Deena, Vini noticed that she looked a lot like Pizzo, and she wondered if this might be his mother; if not, maybe his aunt, or possibly a grandmother. Engrossed in rifling through a drawer in the sewing table in search of more buttons, Mrs. Harrison didn't notice when Deena threw a pin cushion from the shelf at Vini, who expertly caught it, quickly replacing it on the shelf, while giving the girl puck troll a slight scolding look, though with a smile. The little troll looked so much like Pizzo in the face that Vini was almost sure this was his mother. And the *almost sure* became *pretty positive* when Deena stuck her tongue out at Vini. The guess of mother was correct, as Deena, while living at Doyle Mansion, would eventually give birth to Pizzo, this event taking place twenty-three years before Vini was born.

When Frances returned, Vini was given about twenty buttons, which she slipped into her jeans' pocket along with the others she had collected.

With Mrs. Harrison off to the kitchen, Vini happened to notice three thimbles sitting on the sewing table, one of which was the exact thimble with the pattern of little diamond shapes from the sewing basket at Doyle Mansion.

As Vini admired it, Frances offered it to her. "You said your mother collects them."

Vini might have taken it, except that a thought was suddenly laid onto her brain by a deep voice that sounded and felt like a midnight rumble of thunder, this being at the exact moment she felt the same presence that was in the field just after the flash of light from the unicorn and the burst of wind.

Take the buttons, but not the thimble.

The deep voice slightly reminded her of an old professor, maybe reading poetry aloud, because it sounded somewhat formal and scholarly, with perhaps something of a soft British accent to it.

You will find the thimble again at the mansion, when you go there next.

Of course, Vini realized. If I take it now, it won't be there in the future. And I know right where it is in the future.

“No, I won't take it, thank you though,” she responded to Frances. “But take good care of it; I have a feeling it might be very special for some reason.”

It was definitely not the girl puck troll who had laid the thought onto her brain. For one thing, it had been a male voice. Also, Vini knew that puck trolls didn't communicate with actual words.

Leaving the study, Annabelle was just coming downstairs. “I borrowed a book, Fanny!” she called, on her way out the door to read on the front porch.

“Don't call me that!” Frances said heatedly, evidently very upset.

Her knee propping the screen door open, while smiling in an almost superior way, as though she enjoyed distressing her sister, Annabelle called back, “I know, you don't like it when kids at school call you that. Sorry, I forgot.”

In noticing that the look on Annabelle's face was anything but sorry, but more seemed to be saying, *I'll call you Fanny whenever I want*, Vini thought her a little insensitive to call her sister by a name she knew she didn't like. This seemed strange because Vini hadn't ever gotten the idea from either Mrs. Doyle or Annabelle in the future that the girls hadn't gotten along, so she felt the sisters must have become better friends as the years passed.

“Just because people call her Annie, she thinks it's okay to call me Fanny,” Frances said. “It just makes me so mad.”

“So that's what the issue with Gerard is,” Vini suddenly realized.

“Yes, he used to call me Fanny, even though he knew I didn't like it,” Frances answered, “and he only just recently stopped. Now, he's into the whole thing of saying my name super slow, like he's making fun of me because I'm sensitive about my name.”

Vini had not gotten any bad feelings from Gerard; in fact, she had gotten the exact opposite feelings, and she told Frances, “I don't think

he was making fun or being mean. I think he was being careful because he knows you don't like to be called Fanny. And actually," she added, "Fanny is a classic name, a very pretty name, I think."

"Well, I don't like it," Frances replied, as Vini suddenly recalled a conversation they had had once at the mansion about nicknames, and Mrs. Doyle not wanting to comment as to whether or not she had ever had one.

"You know," Vini said, "I've always been able to tell when people are up to no good, or being mean, or lying. Gerard might have been joking with you, but it was in a nice way. I think he was truly being careful about your name, and I think he likes you. He's definitely not a bad person, I'm sure of that." With Frances thinking over what Marie was telling her, Vini added, "But don't ever be afraid to tell people that it bothers you, because names are important. I think I read once that in the hereafter, God will give each of His children a name that is special, and that is just between Him and that person. But in the meantime, the names that our earthly parents have given us are also special; and people should treat these names with care."

As the girls were having glasses of iced tea in the living room a short while later, in being fascinated with the family's small black and white television, Vini told Frances, "We don't watch much television."

"We don't either," Frances replied. "But I really look forward to *I Love Lucy* each week. I just love Lucy; you never know what she's going to do next."

"She's hilarious," Vini agreed. Having watched a lot of *I Love Lucy* reruns in her younger years, Vini was familiar with most of Lucy's antics, so it was funny to think about the show being new, and to hear Frances talk about not knowing what to expect from one week to the next.

After taking their empty tea glasses to the kitchen, the girls went out into the back yard where they sat in the swings of a swing set that wasn't used much anymore since the family had pretty much outgrown it. With the yard shaded by many trees and with a healthy breeze kicking up, Vini put on her sweater.

Etowa happened to be nearby, looking on, though this wasn't particularly related to a move in the game with his counterpart. While Boko had arranged for the demon pack, which he intended should rid

the world of the girl known as Frances Harrison, Etowa's countermove had actually been in Vini's time, where a seed was planted, targeting Ben, his mind specifically, this being the idea of using unicorns for time travel, which he of course mentioned to his friend, since she was the one who could summon unicorns. The seed then blossomed in Vini's mind as the answer to God's messages to her about the fifties and the thimble. While Vini had been correct in assuming that the thimble had put her in the right place at the right time to save Frances, it was important for another reason as well, one that Vini would become aware of in her own time, in the not-too-distant future, when she would have great need of that exact thimble for something very crucial.

As they sat swinging, Vini wondered if Mrs. Doyle might eventually remember her as having visited in the past. *I doubt she will*, Vini thought, hoping she was correct. However, in pondering further, she decided that it might not be a bad thing if Mrs. Doyle did eventually figure this out because she would then for sure hire Vini to clean for her. Having access to the library at the mansion was a good part of how Vini had been able to find unicorns.

Thinking about the library, Vini said, "Be sure to take Gerard up on his offer to borrow books."

"Actually, I don't think I will," Frances replied, as her timid side was already trying to talk the more outgoing part of her character out of being this bold.

"Well, think about it. I think you should," Vini encouraged.

Though it was hard to imagine Mrs. Doyle being so shy and a little insecure, Vini did remember that she herself had been this way not too long ago. She also remembered well that it was Mrs. Doyle who had helped her learn to roar, and develop a healthy amount of self-confidence. In fact, this was part of the reason God had put Mrs. Doyle in Vini's life.

In recalling this, Vini, off the cuff, decided to say, "With God's light shining upon us, we can do anything. So pray and read the bible, a lot. Even if you don't do a lot of other reading, read the bible. God actually talks to me through the bible."

"Religion is hard to understand," Frances replied, shaking her head a little. "The bible is hard to understand."

“But it’s worth working at it to try to understand it because the bible has all of the answers, to everything,” Vini said. “Jesus is truly the answer to everything. I’m sure of it. Think of reading the bible as good brain exercise.”

“My mom is always telling me to use my brain more, and to use *more* of my brain,” Frances said.

“The unused part of the brain might be where all of the unicorns are hiding,” Vini answered. Although Mrs. Doyle had once said this to her, Vini didn’t think she was changing the future much by saying it to Frances.

However, a moment later she chided herself for possibly being a little too unguarded. It was hard to figure this out. In fact, when she thought about it too much, time travel was a little mind-boggling.

What wasn’t hard for Vini to figure out was that Mrs. Doyle had been pretty amazing and wonderful her whole life, even as a teen, so friendly, hopeful, and full of dreams of magical things like unicorns and gnomes.

With the mention of unicorns, Frances had launched into a story about a book she once read that made mention of a unicorn whistle.

“I thought about going on a quest for one,” she added. “But I’m probably getting too old for those kinds of things.”

“You can never outgrow unicorns,” Vini said earnestly.

“I do still hunt for gnomes in the garden,” Frances admitted.

“But in this part of the country, the garden is more likely to have tiny trolls, than gnomes,” Vini said. “And ones that can be out in daylight and not turn to stone.”

“Tiny trolls that can be out in daylight...” Frances pondered, with skepticism.

“Yep,” Vini answered, very assuredly. “And they like to throw things, so watch out. But they’re not dangerous.”

Vini had decided it was okay to be a little unguarded, especially since she didn’t want Frances to ever outgrow things like hunting around the garden for gnomes or going on quests for things like unicorn whistles.

“There might also be hobgoblins in the garden,” Vini said, “that are expertly camouflaged like chameleons, and that can shapeshift. So watch out for them too because they actually *are* dangerous.”

Smiling, because she thought it likely that Marie was joshing her, but it was a fun kind of joshing, Frances said, “I wish you lived closer so we could ‘hang out’ together. If you come back to visit your cousins again, look me up.”

“I will,” Vini answered. “I’m pretty sure we’re meant to meet again sometime.”

Declining an invitation to stay for the rest of the afternoon and have dinner with the family, Vini told Frances that she needed to be getting back to her aunt and cousins, before adding, “And by the way, God wouldn’t have put unicorns into the hearts of man if they didn’t exist. So you should never stop believing.”

“I won’t,” Frances replied.

“And if you ever need to do something really brave, but you’re scared to do it. Don’t worry. God will help you; He will teach you to roar. All you have to do is trust in Him.”

With Frances looking at her a little quizzically, but also smiling while mulling over the words of encouragement, Vini suddenly remembered something. Fishing in her sweater pocket, she pulled out a sand dollar that, thankfully, hadn’t broken during the fall in the field.

Presenting it to Frances while giving her a big hug, Vini said, “Until we meet again.”

Leaving through the side gate to the street, she gave Mrs. Doyle a wave and a smile.

Heading in the direction of Doyle Mansion, Vini cried a little in realizing that she likely would never see Frances again. Pulling the handkerchief out of her pocket that Frances had given her, Vini wiped the tears from her eyes.

Just before turning the corner onto Paloma Drive, Vini was incredibly surprised to feel the presence of Lyydu nearby. Looking around, she couldn’t see him because he was currently invisible. Since there were no people presently in the area, she called softly to him, after which, she heard a slight rustling behind a large clump of pittosporum bushes very near her position on the sidewalk. Creeping behind the bushes, Vini was delighted to discover that this was indeed Lyydu, but Lyydu as a little thunderbird, only about half the size that he would be in the future. Despite his smaller size, a thunderbird is a thunderbird, and just about anyone might have felt intimidated by the fierce

appearance of the creature who was roughly shoulder height to Vini in his present state. However, while she knew Lyydu didn't know her, she had no qualms in approaching and gently stroking the soft feathers of his neck, which he calmly accepted. Lyydu, of course, wouldn't know Charlie either for many decades, and was currently working as a protector for someone else, in another country actually. But for some reason, he had felt called to this place on this particular day. And the moment Vini called to him, he also knew he was supposed to meet this girl, even though he didn't know then that he would meet her again in the future.

Vini didn't stay long with Lyydu. After only a minute or so of petting him, she bid him a silent, *Farewell*, before heading to the alley behind the mansion where she noticed five doves, sitting on a low branch of the mulberry tree. These were the same five doves she had seen in her dream in the spring, one of which had led her through the woods to a clearing containing a dragon. *How extraordinary*, she thought, as she studied the birds the best she could in the subdued light of the shade under the tree. Even in the low light, their feathers held a metallic sheen. *Five different colors—a deep burnt red, a plum that is almost blue, a light mossy green, a dark tangerine, and a purple like pale African violets.*

Suddenly feeling a need to get home (probably because Boko was near the mansion), Vini broke off studying the doves to call a unicorn, which ended up being the same one that had brought her to this time period.

The trip back to her own time was much like the one she experienced to reach the 1950's, but in reverse.

When slipping from the unicorn's back in her own time, just outside the rear gate to the mansion, she was surprised to discover that seemingly no time had passed at all from when she had left first thing in the morning. Not only was the sun still in its early-morning position, Violet was still sweeping the second-floor balcony. And Vini actually arrived back at her house only about forty minutes after having left it.

While she may not have been able to understand how time travel might work, she was immensely thankful to have been able to travel to the fifties, not only to save Frances, but also to get to see Mrs. Doyle

once again. *Thank You, thank You, thank You*, she told God, after which, she prayed a good long while about a lot of other things as well.

For the rest of the day, Vini mostly did research and took notes, also helping her mother with some cleaning and other chores around the house. She also played soccer in the back yard with Preston for an hour or so.

Nearing the end of the day, she found herself facing something else that was unexpected, namely, fatigue. She shouldn't have been surprised. In having two days' activities basically squeezed into one, of course she'd be tired. She fell asleep literally the moment her head hit the pillow.

Back at the Harrison's home in the fifties, just before bedtime, Frances reflected on the day. She really admired the girl she had met, so outgoing and able to talk so easily with people she had never met before; and Frances wished she could be more like that. As she was drifting off to sleep, she said a prayer to God to ask Him to help her be more like Marie, and to be nicer to Gerard, who, in truth didn't seem all that bad. He hadn't called her Fanny for a while, and he had offered to let her borrow books. That was nice of him.

Gerard was reflecting on a few things too as he readied himself for bed. In looking out the window in the afternoon, he had seen the unicorn, though only briefly before the girl hopped on and they vanished. While he was certain of what he had seen, he had already decided not to tell anyone. *Who would believe me?*

Gerard saw something else that afternoon too, just after glimpsing the unicorn, but only in the eye of his mind. This was related to when he broke his ankle in the late spring when tripping on the basement stairs. He had missed out on a lot of summer fun because of the broken ankle. However, what he saw relating to this, which really equated to more of an understanding than an actual vision, was that having the broken ankle kept him from going to a friend's house where he would have caught measles from his friend's younger brother. While Gerard had been vaccinated for measles, sometimes vaccinations didn't work; and although he would have survived measles, his older sister's unborn baby would not have survived his sister catching the disease because measles could be very dangerous to pregnant women. With Margret having been married only a year, and this being her first pregnancy,

Gerard could only imagine how devastating it might be for her to lose her first child to miscarriage, and for Gerard himself to lose his first niece, a charming little girl named Melanie.

What a revelation, he thought. So my broken ankle turned out to be a good thing. Who could have guessed? He had been so mad about the injury, and he now realized that he shouldn't have been. And I also shouldn't ruminate over it when it still hurts sometimes.

His sister's first child would indeed turn out to be a girl, whom Margret would name Melanie without Gerard suggesting it to her, which would confirm to him that his revelation had indeed been a true one.

Chapter Twelve

The Scavenger Hunt

The start of September was as busy as August had been for Vini, as far as her school studies, water polo, working, and reading up on dragons both in Mrs. Doyle's journals and in books from the libraries.

Rainbows were definitely prominent in her findings, as were peacocks; but with the information being mostly a muddle of opinions, and unproved, it was hard to figure out how rainbows, dragons, and peacocks all might fit together.

At the start of the Labor Day weekend, after school on Friday, Vini visited the mansion to do a little research in the upstairs library.

"So ancient sky serpents used rainbows somehow in their travels," she mused, while taking notes. "Maybe a rainbow could act as a guide. In seeing a rainbow, they could tell where to go." The book she was reading also made mention of a rainbow pointing to something that was well hidden, but that was also in plain sight.

Ugh, riddles, Vini thought. Though riddles were sometimes fun, she didn't particularly like them in her research.

Switching to a different book, she read about an enormouse who liked to take care of orphan cats. *That sounds like a fairy tale to me.*

The same book had information on doves expressing that some were probably magical, and might not be as docile as they tended to look and act.

Reviewing a few of her notes on doves, Vini felt sure they were somehow closely connected to dragons. But exactly how was currently eluding her. She was definitely missing something, and she had a nagging feeling that it was something right under her nose that was actually very obvious. *When I finally figure it out*, she thought, *I'm sure I'll feel really stupid because it will probably be something I should have known all along.*

Her eyes a little tired from reading, which she had done a great deal of all week, Vini decided to head home. *Plenty for one day*, she told herself, *especially since I'm coming back in the morning*.

Preston would be coming too, both Saturday and Sunday, to do some yardwork. He was trying to earn a little extra money to buy more comic books. In addition to working for Dave and Violet, he was doing a few chores at Mr. Galloway's house as well.

After an early breakfast on Saturday, Preston walked with his sister to the mansion, where Vini got busy cleaning and doing laundry right away, her plan being to finish early so that she would have the whole afternoon to do research.

Since it seemed Preston was going to be around the mansion a little more, Violet had decided to show him the downstairs library. Though interested in some of the artifacts, he didn't particularly think the library was any big deal.

"We're keeping it a secret from outsiders for now," Violet said.

"I'm good at keeping secrets," he answered, smiling. This was indeed true because he never told anyone, not even his treehouse friends, about Eleta, or about any of the magical goings on at the mansion, or about the fact that his sister could call unicorns.

"We think it's a good idea to keep it secret because of the break-ins we have sometimes in the neighborhood," she added.

Nodding, Preston said, "I bet some of this stuff is worth a lot."

"So far, Vini is the only one with the code down here," Violet told him, "besides me and Dave."

"Well that makes sense," Preston responded, "since she's the main bookworm around here."

"I was waiting to let others use it much," Violet went on, "because I want to get everything cataloged without too many people moving stuff around."

"Oh, I won't ever need to use this library," Preston said. "Mrs. Doyle always said I could use the upstairs one for school if I needed to look anything up."

"You still can," Violet assured him.

"I probably won't," Preston replied indifferently. "The library at school is fine. I know it doesn't have all the old books the mansion has,

but I don't really need the old books. Plus, I get most of my school stuff done by looking online."

Back upstairs, Dave and Preston both headed outside to work on clearing a spot for a larger garden and for a greenhouse that Violet and Dave were planning for the future. Ben arrived in short order to help.

Inside, while cleaning, Vini remembered to get the thimble with the diamond pattern from the sewing basket. Showing it to Violet, she asked, "Could I possibly have this, to remember Mrs. Doyle by?"

"Sure," Violet replied, "we have plenty of thimbles." This was true; in fact, there were twelve in a dresser drawer in the sewing room, along with another two in the sewing basket.

Vini decided she would carry the thimble with her always, in her pocket along with her keys, small wallet, lip balm, and the handkerchief Frances had given her. She had never liked carrying a purse, and never felt she needed to, since just about anything important she might need would fit into her pockets. For anything that wouldn't fit in pockets, she chose to use either a backpack or gym bag, rather than a purse.

Pondering the thimble, she wondered if it might be magical. Whether or not it was, she felt it would likely turn out to be important someday; otherwise, she wouldn't have gotten the cloud message about it. Looking closely at the thimble, she thought what a clever little object it was, and not just in being well made, but for what it represented. *It doesn't just hold someone's finger to keep it safe from harm, she decided, it holds industry and hard work too.* In thinking of this concept, Vini smiled in wondering if she might be using more of her brain, which she felt would have pleased Frances' mother.

Walking home in the afternoon, without Preston because he was staying late to help Ben finish a project in the garden, Vini again found her mind on the thimble, in particular, the small size of it. *For being magical or in some other way important, it's pretty tiny.* However, she knew well that small things could be very powerful. Take Pizzo, for instance. Only the other day Vini had observed him rooting around for something in the garden shed and hoisting a flowerpot over his head that was easily three times his size.

Other small things can hold great power too, like seeds, which are often so tiny, but then grow to plants of great sizes, she thought, smiling as she remembered the parable of the mustard seed in the bible.

She still wondered what the thimble's connection might have been to her traveling to the 1950's, if it was simply something that had put her in the right time and place to help Frances, or something else. She didn't want to occupy her mind too long with this since she might never have an answer to the puzzle. However, pondering it made her remember that God isn't in any way limited by time, which means He wouldn't be limited by size either. *So size might be just as mysterious as time travel.*

With this thought, something else popped into her brain that she had read somewhere once—the idea that all of hell might fit into a thimble, whereas, heaven is endless in size. *Oh golly! What if hell is in this very thimble?* She was actually more than a little panicked by this idea.

Pulling the thimble out of her pocket, she again studied it closely.

Not getting any bad feelings from it, and not seeing any burning fire inside, as she slipped it back into her pocket, she decided to think of more pleasant thoughts, about heaven, and the numbers of people living there, likely each in a mansion, because she knew Jesus was preparing nice homes for His family. *Not too big*, she hoped, *because just like here, I'm sure we will need to keep our houses in heaven clean.* Vini was actually glad her home was much smaller than Doyle Mansion because, even with the whole family helping, it was still quite a task to keep clean.

The long weekend ended up being a relaxing break from routine for Vini, especially when Tulko took her on a just-for-fun outing Saturday evening to Ayers Rock in Australia. It was morning there, and very beautiful with the slant of the morning sun bathing the red stone in a soft glow.

The sun hadn't made it up yet when they made a stop in Switzerland on their way home, but the moon was very big and bright which enabled Vini to see an old church situated about halfway up a mountainside. There was no parking area around the secluded church that was evidently accessed by a walking trail winding its way up the mountain.

Landing in a grassy area by the church, Tulko waited outside while Vini entered. Though no one was presently inside, several lit candles illuminated the pulpit and a large wooden cross on the wall behind it.

Deciding to pray silently, Vini knelt in front of the cross, instead of sitting in one of the pews.

Dear Lord, thank You for Your many blessings. Praise Your holy name, Praise Your glorious Son, Praise Your wondrous works, Praise Salvation, Praise the Holy Spirit, Praise the Holy Bible. Please continue to guide me. Help me walk Your Path. Help me hear Your voice and Your directions clearly. And help me always to obey even if I don't understand. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

Both working and doing research on Labor Day morning, on a break, Vini decided to talk to Dave and Violet. Ever since her trip to the 1950's, she had been trying to figure out how to tell them about the possible extra door, the one she had seen on the tour with Gerard that was next to the door to the basement. She wanted to be careful as to how she went about this because she didn't, at this point, know if she should tell them she had traveled back in time to save Mrs. Doyle from a pack of demons. From experience, she had learned that some things God was directing her to do were better left as secrets.

Having watched a movie once in which a person found a hidden door behind a wall by tapping on the wall to see if it sounded hollow, she decided to use this as a starting point in the conversation. "When I was dusting the barometer," she said, "I accidentally knocked the duster against the wall, and noticed it sounded funny, like hollow. Then I knocked on the wall on the other side of the basement door and noticed it definitely sounds different. So I was wondering if maybe there was an empty space behind this wall, like maybe a hidden room."

Violet was very excited about the prospect, while Dave just looked amused. However, he was always a good sport about any sort of adventure, or investigation of a mystery, no matter how small or futile he thought the result might turn out to be. Plus, having been as astounded as Violet about the discovery of the subbasement library, he was learning never to discount anything as a possibility.

"Just to the left of the door here," Vini said, whereupon, Dave began tapping and knocking his knuckles on the wall.

After a minute or so of tapping and knocking, he also examined the walls on either side of the door closely, where he discovered that the paneling was slightly different on the left, a little more recessed and with slightly wider grooves around the edges of a section that looked to

be just about the right size to have a door concealed behind it. On a whim, he pushed hard against the panel with both hands. And it moved!

“Well I’ll be,” he said.

With Violet’s help, continuing to manipulate and maneuver, they discovered that the panel not only pushed inwards slightly, but also slid to the left behind the wall, almost like how a pocket door might work. In the recess, to Vini’s delight, they did indeed discover the mysterious door, still there, and looking exactly as she remembered it, with a glass doorknob but no lock.

Upon opening the door, they discovered an extremely narrow staircase, only just a little over two feet wide, that appeared to run exactly next to the regular stairs leading down to the basement. Not finding any light switch or pull chain just inside the door, Violet hurried to the kitchen to retrieve two flashlights, after which, they carefully descended, Dave going first with one flashlight, followed by Vini, with Violet bringing up the rear wielding the second flashlight. With no railing (there wouldn’t have been room for one), they went very slowly, hugging and bracing against the walls for support. This staircase was a little steeper than the one they were used to in the basement, and while straight at first like the basement stair, it eventually curved, first to the right, then to the left. And for the amount of time they spent on it before finally reaching a landing, it was obvious this one reached much deeper under the mansion than the basement.

Two doors faced them on the landing, which was small, at only about four-by-six feet in size. Again faced with glass doorknobs and no locks, Dave opened the right door first to discover a small room, not quite half the size of the upstairs butler’s pantry, completely empty, other than a pull-chain light switch (which worked to illuminate the room by a single bare bulb in the ceiling fixture) and a set of built-in shelves holding nothing more than two spare light bulbs.

“Is this like a safe room?” Violet asked.

“Maybe,” Dave answered.

“But would it be for people or valuables?” Vini wondered.

The room was evidently ventilated in some way because the air felt fresh and not stuffy. Indicating a small air vent on the wall beside the shelves, Dave speculated that the same system that controlled the

humidity and ventilation for the downstairs library probably worked for this room too.

The equipment for the system was housed in a fairly good-sized room, though with a very low ceiling, located between the basement and the subbasement. Situated like a mezzanine floor, the utility room could be accessed not only by a ceiling hatch in the subbasement library but also by a trap door in the basement that Dave had recently found under an old leather couch that hadn't been moved in a long time. Since it was a rather heavy piece of furniture, the few times Vini and Violet had cleaned under it, they just reached under with a duster, rather than moving it. But Dave had asked Ben and Sam to help him wrestle it down to the subbasement, after which, when sweeping the spot where the couch had been, he discovered the door. The access from the basement would be handy for a time when the system might need professional servicing, so the service people wouldn't end up seeing the downstairs library or any of its contents.

Turning off the light in the small room, they moved to investigate the second door, behind which they discovered another flight of stairs leading down to a tunnel with a dirt floor but whose walls and arched ceiling were fully lined with old brick. The tunnel was roomy enough that they could have traveled side-by-side. However, the girls again let Dave take the lead, following closely behind as he made his way forward. The ceiling, though somewhat low, was nearly seven feet high, so they were able to walk without stooping. Like the room, the air in the tunnel didn't feel stuffy. Indicating grates at regular intervals along the walls, Dave said, "It's probably vented to the outside for fresh air."

The tunnel curved gently several times, both left and right, so they couldn't particularly tell in which direction they might be heading. After what seemed to be almost a quarter of a mile, they came to a place in the tunnel that had experienced a cave-in, the rubble of which reached almost to the ceiling. While they probably could have moved a few bricks and rocks and dirt clods to make their way through, Dave, worried for their safety, decided it would be too risky.

As they were heading back, he said, "Later, I'll get down here with better light and move some of the rubble, and check the structure of the tunnel before we do any more exploring." (With his engineering

experience, he should be able to tell if the tunnel would be safe enough to use.) “But I wouldn’t want to put a lot of effort into excavating and repairing until we find out if it goes somewhere worthwhile,” he added. “I’d hate to do a lot of work if it only leads to an old barn or an apple orchard. For as old as it is, and with the changes to the neighborhood over the years, it might only dead end into someone’s basement.”

“Definitely don’t put a lot of effort into it,” Violet agreed. “I’d rather get moving on the greenhouse, because we know we’re going to use that.” Dave and Violet already donated well over half of their garden produce to the local food bank, because they felt people getting assistance there would benefit from having fresh fruits and vegetables added to the canned goods and other staples they received. In having a greenhouse, they would be able to grow food year round to donate in the winter months as well.

When they got back to the house, after having lunch, while Vini was cleaning the upstairs bedrooms and Violet was doing laundry, Dave spent a couple of hours poring over the many sheets of plans that made up the architectural drawings of the house, including the updates over the years. The narrow stair wasn’t on any of the plans, but Dave did find something that someone just casually looking at the plans likely wouldn’t notice. Showing Vini and Violet, he said, “The basement stairs on the plans are wider than they are in actuality, and the music room on the other side of the wall actually measures out a good foot and a half smaller than it should be.”

“So they worked this in secretly,” Violet said. “I’m not surprised. I remember Cousin Frances saying that Gerard’s family was full of people that did construction, like brick masons, electricians, and carpenters. So they could have done it without any outsiders knowing.”

“Like the downstairs library,” Vini remarked. “I imagine that was done in secret from outsiders too.”

“Very likely,” Violet agreed. “When they had building materials delivered, they probably just told people they were remodeling.”

“But the excavation for it probably raised eyebrows,” Dave speculated. “For a room that size, they were probably hauling off truckloads of dirt for a couple of years.”

Smiling, Vini didn’t comment.

Just before leaving for the day, Vini asked Pizzo, who was in the kitchen looking for a snack, if he knew where the tunnel at the bottom of the narrow stair led.

Instead of nodding or shaking his head, he smiled impishly before throwing a twist pretzel at her; after which, he ran off, carrying eight more pretzels with him looped on his arms, as though they might have been handbags. (Pizzo actually did know where the tunnel led; but at this time, he didn't particularly think Vini needed to know.)

The short week at school passed quickly; and on Friday evening, while Vini was out on a short jaunt with Tulko to patrol the area for lawbreakers, they ended up stopping a carjacking only a couple of miles from her house. She hadn't taken many trips like this in the past month or so because it seemed that crime in the area had died down somewhat. However, she was about to discover that it was not nearly as died down as she might have hoped.

Walking to work on Saturday, with Preston along, Vini was very excited because it was Violet's birthday. Dave had wanted to throw her a surprise party; but Violet ended up having an idea that Dave thought even better—that of a scavenger hunt for more secret doors, stairs, hidden panels, tunnels, and whatever else might be waiting to be discovered at the mansion.

Ever since Vini had found the downstairs library, and now the hidden staircase, Violet had wanted to know what other secrets the mansion might hold, besides the slide-tunnel leading from the upstairs library to the basement, designed to help someone get from the second floor to the basement in an emergency, such as a demon invasion of the home. Of course, the slide hadn't really been a secret, just a slightly-forgotten-about escape route until Albert and Louetta had drawn their attention to it in the spring. With regards to the slide-tunnel, Violet had recently employed Preston and Ben to clean it, which they did by riding the spiral slide from the trap door in the upstairs library, to the basement, again and again, while holding towels to the walls, ceiling, and the floor on either side of the metal slide.

Dave had been up early making snacks, prepping for lunch, and baking a cake for the celebration. Violet had firmly told everyone, "No birthday presents. My present will be if we find something in the search; and if not, so be it."

Charlie had been invited, and would be driving herself (one of her first solo driving trips) because she had just gotten her car. Ben and Sam would be coming later because they were busy doing yardwork for one of their neighbors.

Vini and Preston did a couple of chores while waiting for Charlie to arrive and for Dave to get finished up in the kitchen.

Dust mopping on the third floor, Vini could hear Preston outside rattling on about something, and then shouting at Dave through the kitchen window to ask him a question.

Shaking out the dust mop from a balcony a short while later, she again heard Preston yelling about something. Sighing, she did her best to tune him out, while thinking, *I can't even get away from his noise when I'm at work.*

Downstairs, after stowing the dust mop in the butler's pantry, she went out to sweep the back porch; at which point, she heard her brother calling to her. Still mostly in tuning-him-out mode, she was only half listening, until his voice suddenly got a lot louder. "Hey!" he shouted at her from the shed. "I said have you seen the shovel, the one with the green handle?!"

"No," Vini answered in an annoyed tone. "Why would I know where the shovel is?"

She was frankly a little surprised he was acting this way, yelling and being somewhat obnoxious, while they were at someone else's house. And she was on the verge of warning him when she suddenly thought better of the idea because she didn't want anything (especially not an argument with her brother) to put a damper on Violet's birthday.

Vini was glad she had caught herself because, upon finding the shovel he was looking for near the compost heap, Preston quickly piped down.

When Charlie arrived just before ten o'clock, they all gathered in the parlor, at which point, Violet said, "So we're not looking for odds and ends from a list like we might for a traditional scavenger hunt. We'll all be looking for secret panels and doorways and such."

"But before we start the official hunt," Dave chimed in, "Violet will be hunting for her presents."

"I said no presents," Violet protested.

"I know," Dave answered, "but we couldn't help ourselves."

Vini and Preston had gone in together to buy her an antique candle holder. Charlie had baked an assortment of macaroons, Violet's current favorite among cookies. (Charlie had also baked various fruit-filled cookies and mini pecan pies for everyone, though Dave had specifically told her not to bring anything.) Dave had gotten her a bracelet. Even Pizzo had made something special for Violet, though he ended up getting a little frustrated that she took so long to find it. Dave had hidden the presents, and he actually didn't hide them in places difficult for his wife to find. In fact, as she began to hunt, Violet was able to find everything in less than fifteen minutes. Pizzo was simply impatient because he was especially looking forward to the birthday goodies that Dave was planning to start setting out after Violet finished opening her presents.

Pizzo's gift was wrapped in tissue paper upon which was written, "To Violet from Pizzo, Happy Birthday!" Inside was a tiny framed colored-pencil drawing of the mansion, very detailed for only being about four-by-five inches in size. Dave had made the frame, and bought a tiny easel for the drawing to be displayed on.

"It's a masterpiece!" Violet exclaimed. And she wasn't just being nice to Pizzo; she meant it. She would end up keeping the treasure on her bedside table.

Pizzo had been trying to be nicer to Violet lately, especially because she had recently knitted him a little afghan for his bed. In addition to the birthday present, he had been throwing things at her less for the past couple of weeks.

As far as his drawing, ever since Louetta had given him a tiny painting she did for him, he had been doing a bit of his own smaller-scale art, so that he could further decorate his den. So far, he had lots of little sketches of things he had seen in the garden: flowers, a wind horse, shiny doves, a herd of wooly crotons, a unicorn, another unicorn, and one of the crepe myrtle trees. He had also drawn some things from his brain after reading stories in the bible, like Daniel in the lion's den and Joseph wearing his coat of many colors.

So enthralled with the gift, Violet chased the little troll down to give him a kiss on the top of his head. (Knowing what she was intending, and because he didn't particularly want any part in it, Pizzo had definitely tried to run; but he hadn't been fast enough.) With the kiss,

he turned bright red and did run off for a bit. But, of course, he soon came back to have various goodies that Dave was starting to set out in the parlor as they began their search of the mansion.

While Preston went off with Dave and Violet, Vini and Charlie hunted together. Though they searched fairly thoroughly—behind tapestries and bookshelves, under rugs, and inside closets; while examining wall panels, ceilings, and floorboards closely—as of lunchtime, their search yielded nothing.

When Sam and Ben arrived, the scavenger hunters stopped for lunch, which was an elaborate spread of cold cuts, cheeses, pickles, olives, and other deli-like treats. Having birthday cake and ice cream after, the twins presented Violet with an African violet in a handmade pot. Both Ben and Sam had recently started taking pottery lessons from a neighbor.

After eating, they all began hunting again, in earnest, with Violet and Dave also enjoying a few trips down the slide together because they hadn't done so for a while.

Heike was visiting, to have lunch with Pizzo, along with cake and ice cream, which they ate while sitting on the back porch railing together. When they got tired of watching birds, hairy vetches, and rabbits, they went inside for a bit to watch the people.

Pizzo knew about a lot of hidden and secret things at the mansion; but he didn't necessarily think others needed to know everything that he knew. He was in the process of showing Heike things like the hidden staircase and various tunnels, but he hadn't shown her everything yet. Except that she already knew about the tunnel that Dave, Vini, and Violet had recently discovered because it actually led to one of her favorite hang-out spots.

Heike left midafternoon, taking two cookies with her to have later.

After his friend left, Pizzo wandered outside again where he happened to notice a single watermelon seed sitting on the back porch. He thought it odd because, as far as he knew, there hadn't been a watermelon at the mansion for about two months. Not only that, but they weren't common in the area in September. Absentmindedly picking the seed up and slipping it into his pocket, Pizzo suddenly had a thought that he should be even nicer to Violet, especially today because it was her birthday.

Heading inside again, he found her on the second floor, a good spot in his mind because it was very near something he wanted to show her, which turned out to be a hidden niche behind a coffered wall panel at the end of the second-floor hall directly next to a window. Following Pizzo's gestured instructions, Violet managed to get it open by pressing first on part of the windowsill trim, then on one corner of the coffered panel. Inside the niche, which was only about a foot square in size, she found a journal.

"Thank you, Pizzo," she said.

Backing away, in case she might try to kiss him again, he gave her his *whatever, no-big-deal* look and wave before sauntering off.

Taking a quick peek into the journal, she carried it down to the parlor where she found Vini and Charlie taking a break from the search. Handing the book to Vini, Violet said, "This was in a hidden alcove in a wall on the second floor. There's nothing filled out on the name plate; but I can tell it's not Cousin Frances' handwriting, so this must have belonged to Gerard. It looks like a man's writing to me."

Examining the journal, Vini could also tell the handwriting wasn't Mrs. Doyle's; and she agreed with Violet that it looked masculine. As she tried to hand it back, Violet shook her head. "No," she said. "Cousin Frances willed all of her journals to you, including any that might have been Gerard's, so I'm sure she would have wanted you to have this one too. And it doesn't look much older than her journals, so I don't think it would have belonged to Gerard's father or hers, or one of their grandfathers. But even if this was of an older generation, it would still come to you."

"Thank you," Vini said, whereupon, she and Charlie immediately took the book down to the subbasement library to store on the shelf with Mrs. Doyle's journals.

"I probably won't have time to look through it anytime soon," Vini told Charlie. "I've been doing so much reading lately, I end up cross-eyed some days."

"I'm sure it'll keep," Charlie remarked.

When they were coming up from the basement, Vini suddenly thought of a good place to search. With the boys all up in the attic looking around, and Dave and Violet in the kitchen, Vini led Charlie to one of the rear staircases of the mansion, which happened to be the

least-used of the three sets of stairs in the house. Having originally been a servants' staircase, it actually hadn't been used much even in earlier years when the Doyle family employed several servants. Since it was still seldom used, Vini had only cleaned the staircase once, basically having forgotten about it.

Reminding herself to dust the handrails and sweep the stairs later, she made her way to a painting near the top of the staircase that she thought was in somewhat of an odd position on the wall. In having remembered that the laundry chute was concealed behind a painting, she thought something might be behind this one too. She was right! However, Charlie ended up laughing because it was simply a dumbwaiter, once used by the servants to send trays of food upstairs from the kitchen, and then to send the dirty dishes back down again.

"But I've never seen the other end of this downstairs anywhere," Vini said.

"Well, let's go have a look," Charlie said, leading the way back downstairs, where it only took her about ten minutes to find the ground-floor opening to the dumbwaiter behind a shelf in the butler's pantry, which she helped Vini move so that they could raise and lower the waiter, which seemed to still work perfectly, though the cables did squeak and squeal somewhat.

"It's called 'dumb' because it doesn't say anything, like a real waiter might," Charlie told her friend, "and not because it's a dumb idea. Dumbwaiters are actually a good idea, to save time on climbing stairs. They are quicker than stair climbing, so the food can stay hotter."

Having cookies a short while later, Vini and Charlie spent some time in the garden where they sat on a bench to talk.

Charlie still hadn't told her dad about Austin yet. "He's emailed me a couple of times," she told Vini, "but I'm definitely going to wait awhile to tell my dad. I mean, he scared off Craig pretty good. I don't want him to scare off Austin because I really like him."

As Ben, Sam, and Preston came out to start doing some yardwork, after a quick trip inside to say goodbye to Dave and Violet, Charlie left for home.

While Preston was shoveling and raking, he talked loudly to Ben and Sam, about things like comics and a recent martial arts competition.

Shaking her head, Vini thought, *Honestly, it's like he has a megaphone inside his throat or something.* And she hoped he would burn off a good bit of his energy before they went home for the day, so that she could have some peace and quiet while reading in the evening.

This ended up being the case, and Vini was able to get a good bit of research done before bedtime.

However, she was about to discover that what she thought was an overall pleasant and peaceful weekend wasn't so pleasant and peaceful after all because another crime had occurred in the area, this one hitting very close to home in that Mr. Galloway's topiary cross had been vandalized.

Just before midnight on Saturday, Mrs. Wharton's son, Frank, who had just turned eighteen and was a senior at the high school Vini and Charlie attended, had evidently taken it upon himself to cut the cross down with a chainsaw, to the point that he cut off nearly two-thirds of the yew tree. And he would have cut the entire tree down, but something stopped him, two somethings actually that were very leafy and extremely big.

Frank hadn't brought a flashlight with him, because he didn't want to alert anyone ahead of time, his plan being to cut the cross down quickly and leave before the people in the house could rouse themselves to investigate the noise. And with the street light on the corner being somewhat distant, he couldn't tell that the thing that tackled him was a large shrub shaped like an anteater, and the thing that sat on him to keep him from running off was another shrub in the shape of an enormous gorilla.

Heike, having been heavily asleep (and still rubbing her eyes when the police arrived), hadn't wakened the topiaries. However, Memory Magic, from Pizzo having previously brought them to life, had worked with both the anteater and gorilla.

Inside the house, after waking up when hearing the chainsaw, with Mrs. Galloway calling the police, Mr. Galloway speedily donned his robe and slippers. He then grabbed a baseball bat and a flashlight, before hurrying outside.

As soon as the anteater and gorilla saw Mr. Galloway running across the lawns, using other bushes as cover, the pair stealthily snuck

around the side of the house to the rear to get back into their normal spots.

Stunned both by being flattened and from being caught, Frank didn't try to run from Mr. Galloway, who, shaking his head, calmly waited with Frank for the police to arrive, which they did about two minutes later.

Initially, Frank had thought part of the yew had fallen on him. However, he soon realized that something else had smacked into him, hard, and another something had actually pinned him down. But he couldn't very well tell the police that a couple of leafy somethings had knocked him to the ground and sat on him.

In hearing about the vandalism from a neighbor, the whole Aberdeen family walked down the street to see the yew on Sunday afternoon, and console Mr. Galloway. Dave and Violet were there too, looking at the damage.

"The charges are probably going to be trespassing, property damage, and criminal mischief," Mr. Galloway speculated. "They may only be misdemeanors, but he'll still have a criminal record. And if he keeps on this way, he might find it hard to get into college, or get a job."

"I could bring my bow," Preston offered, "and guard the rest of the topiaries for you."

Smiling, Mr. Galloway answered, "Thank you, but no. We can't go shooting people with arrows, even if they are up to no good. However, I am probably going to install a security camera, maybe in the gazebo. And I definitely want you to come next Saturday to mow and rake a few leaves for me."

"Will do," Preston replied.

On Sunday evening, in studying the sheets of plans to the mansion, Dave couldn't find the dumbwaiter on them. "Maybe it was something they added later, as a convenience, like telephones," he told Violet.

"Or maybe it was such a common thing," she suggested, "they didn't need to draw them into plans because a house like this would automatically have one."

"No, it's architecturally complex," Dave said. "They would have had to plan it."

Whatever the case, Violet was happy that the weekend search had discovered two secret things.

Hearing what happened to the yew cross from Heike, Pizzo was very upset; however, he was slightly consoled that two of the topiaries had been able to help catch the culprit. And he was even more cheered when Violet asked him to show her his birthday on the calendar, so that they could have a little party on that day. Taking a pencil, with a big smile, he circled December 31th for her.

Chapter Thirteen

Sugar Bear's Bucket

Being as busy as ever, Vini was surprised at how fast the rest of September flew by.

On the final Saturday of the month, she was at the mansion, dusting in the music room. Pizzo was there also, admiring Louetta's tromp l'oeil painting of the cat napping in the fireplace done on one wall of the room. On a whim, he decided to bring the cat to life, which thrilled everyone in the mansion because the little girl tabby was a delightfully sweet creature. He had brought to life others of Louetta's cats before, kittens actually; but Pizzo liked the fireplace cat much better because it was life-size, not oversized and too big for his liking as the kittens were. But Louetta did tend to paint odd-sized creatures like giant kittens and tiny hippos. In the future, holding Memory Magic, the tabby cat would come to life fairly often, to keep those in the mansion company.

The mansion was hosting a special visitor for the weekend, who was none other than Sugar Bear, a Saint Bernard belonging to a family living down the street. He had visited the mansion once before, but in an unofficial capacity, to help battle demons in the spring. This time was an official visit arranged by his humans who were going out of town for a few days. Since Sugar Bear didn't do well at kennels, because he was such a big dog and needed plenty of space to stretch and run around in, Violet had offered to keep him. Having had a Saint Bernard as a child, she was delighted to welcome Sugar Bear for a visit. With the mansion property being entirely fenced, he would be safe; and upon arrival, he was obviously very happy with the arrangement, running around greeting everyone, even affectionately drooling on Pizzo before galloping around in the garden with the fireplace cat to sniff bushes, flowers, and trees. He was, of course, careful not to step on the flowers.

A blanket had been placed on the back porch for Sugar Bear to lie on during his breaks from running and playing. Later, Vini found both

he and the cat curled up on it, having a nap together. His food and water bowls from home had been placed nearby. Since Sugar Bear was an outside dog, and would be sleeping on the porch while at the mansion, the placement of the water bowl would be fine for nighttime too. Sleeping on the porch was fine with Sugar Bear who knew his doghouse would have been too big to bring. He also knew his humans hadn't deserted him because he was very smart about these sorts of things. He had seen them packing and heard them talking about their trip, and he knew they would come to get him when they got back.

In addition to his food and water bowls, Sugar Bear had brought two toys with him, a giant rubber bone that he often liked to chew and slobber on, and a stainless steel bucket with a rubber gripper on the handle that he frequently carried around with his strong teeth. When dropping him off, his owner had explained, "For some reason in the spring, he just got attached to our stainless steel bucket, like a toy."

Vini knew the reason for this. When Sugar Bear had come to the mansion before, he had grabbed a bucket, with which he managed to give many of the demons a stern beating. Now, he simply thought it a good idea to have a sturdy bucket handy. And he liked the shininess of the stainless steel bucket because he could see himself in it. Being rather a pretty dog, he didn't mind looking at himself on occasion.

Charlie was at the mansion on this day because Violet had asked her to do some baking, in order to stock the freezer with things like cookies, scones, and tartlets. She was also going to make a cake for everyone. While Violet was a good cook, she wasn't great at baking desserts, so she welcomed every chance to hire Charlie for doing some of this.

Piszo was slightly disappointed that Charlie hadn't brought Boomer with her, the reason being that she was going to be too busy in the kitchen to keep an eye on him. However, she probably should have brought him because Sugar Bear would have liked the company. And both Piszo and Sugar Bear could have kept eyes on the Little Scamp, which was what Charlie had started to call her furry friend because he was so often into mischief, and seemed unlikely to grow out of it anytime soon. Lydu often kept watch on Boomer because of this, trying to keep him from getting into too much trouble.

Though disappointed, Piszo tried not to show it because he wanted the treats Charlie was sure to give him while baking. He also hadn't

thrown anything at her for at least a couple of months. In knowing that he walked a fine line sometimes, in throwing things at people and spitting at them on occasion, he mostly tried to be nice to Charlie because her artistry in the kitchen was such a great benefit to him.

Before getting started baking, Charlie sat on the back porch steps for a few minutes to pet Sugar Bear who was having a rest from running, while the tabby was looking at her reflection in the fountain pool. The bucket was sitting next to his blanket, and as Charlie slowly petted, she saw a vision in its shiny surface, again relating to the twins. Having gotten used to her visions, she had started treating them simply as information she was being given, instead of fretting over what she was seeing. Plus, in frequently praying, asking God to help her understand and use the gift appropriately, she had come to a calm and peaceful acceptance about the issue. Trusting in God and asking for His help often enabled people to achieve this state, no matter what their circumstances.

Only the night before, Vini had had another circle-of-friends dream; and in this one, she was given a definite clue as to who the possessed person might be. The person in question was standing directly behind her in the dream; she was sure of it. While almost afraid to turn and see who it was, she knew she had to. However, when she turned, she could only see the outline of the person, like seeing a shadow of someone against a background of light. Though not a complete revelation, Vini could tell the person wasn't Charlie because of the height. The possessed person was definitely taller than Charlie, and more likely male than female.

In now being able to rule Charlie out, late in the morning, when both girls were taking a break in the garden, Vini confided in Charlie about her dreams and, most specifically, that someone very close to them was possessed, like the horses had been.

“So that’s why you were looking at me so funny when I came back from my culinary camp,” Charlie said. “You thought I might be the one.”

“And why were you looking at me so funny that day?” Vini suddenly thought to ask.

After a short pause, Charlie replied, “I was trying to figure out if I should tell you something, relating to my visions. Now I think I have to

because it might be related to your dreams of possession; in fact, I think it probably is.”

She then told Vini about her visions of one twin killing the other; the one seen in Sugar Bear’s bucket had actually given her the answer as to who would end up killing whom. “Sam kills Ben,” she said.

While this was distressing to hear, it was very helpful to Vini. “But is Ben possessed, and that’s why Sam kills him?” she wondered. “Or is a possessed Sam killing his brother.”

Neither of the boys was working at the mansion on this day, being fairly caught up from coming a couple of weekday evenings to work, and deciding to take the weekend off to just laze around at home.

Charlie also confessed that her visions were the main reason why she had started going to the twins’ church. “I wanted to see if I could find out anything,” she said. “Nothing so far, I’m afraid. They both just seem perfectly normal to me.”

“I have an idea,” Vini said. “When you get to a stopping place in the baking, maybe we can run some cookies over to them.”

“And do a little snooping while we’re at their house,” Charlie said, basically finishing Vini’s thought.

Coming to a good stopping point shortly after lunch, and calling the twins to say she and Vini were planning to stop by, Charlie drove them over to the boys’ house. This was actually the first time either of the girls had visited the Dellingers’ home. In fact, very few people ever visited the house because the twins and their uncle mostly tried to keep others away due to the secrecy involved with the boys. Sam and Ben were alone when Charlie and Vini arrived because their uncle was at work.

In just dropping off the cookies and briefly visiting, the girls couldn’t tell which one might be possessed. Vini had hoped she might be able to sense the presence of the demon, as she had the pack of them in the field with Frances. She also remembered the feeling she got in the parlor the day the professor came for tea at the mansion. However, she still wasn’t sure on that day if she had been sensing evil, or just experiencing something like a memory from when a demon had previously been sleeping up the parlor chimney. However, since Sam had been the one at the teatime, she watched him most closely while at the boys’ house.

On their way driving over, the girls had made something of a plan. With Charlie keeping the twins chatting and distracted in the living room, talking about something going on at their church, Vini excused herself to use the bathroom. However, although she was following Ben's directions, she ended up going past the bathroom, where she snuck into Sam's room first. Not finding anything in a quick look around, she snuck back out. She felt fairly safe in snooping because, if anyone were to see her coming out of a bedroom, she could simply say she had gotten the doors mixed up when looking for the bathroom. Vini also felt that she and Charlie were fairly safe in visiting. Although there likely was a demon in the house, only one of the boys was possessed, so the girls could always call on the other twin for help if they came under attack.

Sneaking into Ben's room next, she made a rather disturbing discovery on his bookshelf. *My spiral binder!* Vini thought, almost in shock, as she picked it up. *Stolen from my bedroom the same time the zippered bible was stolen.*

Replacing it in the exact spot she found it, Vini quickly snuck out of the room. Remembering to duck into the bathroom to flush the toilet, and run a little water as though washing her hands, she returned to the living room. Smiling and doing her best to act as if nothing was wrong, she said to Charlie, "Well, we'd better be getting back. Cleaning and baking don't take care of themselves."

In suspecting that Ben was probably the one possessed, she didn't want to confront him at this time, which was the main reason she left the binder where it was. Plus, not seeing the stolen bible, but suspecting he might have taken it as well, she felt that the question as to why he might have done this was too much of an unknown. So she would wait awhile, and make a plan, before talking to him about it.

Vini had thought Kugari had taken both items from her room. Obviously that wasn't the case. In truth, Ben had taken both the binder and the bible. Kugari, while he had tried to steal her backpack the same day, had gotten nothing because Eleta had stopped him.

On the ride back to work, Vini told Charlie about the binder. "That means he probably took the bible too, the one that helped me figure out how to call unicorns."

“But is he for sure the one possessed, and did he take the bible to keep someone else from figuring out the same thing?” Charlie asked.

Still very puzzled about the possession thing, Vini answered, “But Sam was the one at the teatime when I felt the coldness, which was a lot like what I felt before when a demon was up the chimney.”

Arriving back at the mansion, as they came through the side gate and up to the back porch, both girls smiled to see the fireplace cat actually lying on top of a sleeping Sugar Bear’s back (mainly because the Saint Bernard was slightly more comfy than the blanket). Both the dog and cat would end up having a good long nap together.

Dave and Violet were both in the subbasement when the girls got back. While working on the cataloging project, Violet was mainly focused on the books, so Dave had decided he would take an inventory of all of the pottery, art glass, artifacts, and other whatnots on the shelves and in the display cases of the library.

That night, Vini had a dream in which she saw the five doves from her previous dream closer up, sitting on the edge of the mansion’s fountain while she sat on the bench nearby to study them. This near, they looked very glossy and metallic, but unlike any metal she had ever seen, with slight curling swirls worked into the pattern of their feathers. The first thing that came to mind was art nouveau, which was something she had learned from Louetta as being a style of art that was somewhat flowery and scrolling. The next thing that popped into her brain was the word, burnished, as a way to describe the smooth gleam, as though the birds had been polished up, perhaps waiting to be displayed, or go on parade to show off their iridescence, or maybe to use their shine in some way, like to distract or draw attention away from something else. This was certainly different than the many regular doves she had seen, and she could tell that these five were very special. The eyes of the birds were also different, looking almost fierce and penetrating. *Five colors*, she mused, *violet, orange, red, indigo, and green*. At the exact moment this list of colors entered her sleepy brain, the indigo dove looked straight at her, with an intense stare into her eyes. It was a look that hurt her eyes, like looking at sunlight, and she felt almost as though the bird was piercing her thoughts.

Vini woke rubbing her eyes, with real sunlight streaming in through her windows. Getting dressed for church, she thought about the dream,

specifically the eyes of the birds, so wild and powerful, and almost as though they might be ready to go to battle at any moment. *Aren't doves supposed to be peaceful?*

Not magical ones evidently, her mind answered. *If they control dragons in some way, which was something she had considered before, they would need to be pretty fierce.*

On the ride to church, she pondered the burnished aspect of the doves, but this time in relation to people, because it reminded her of people needing to get polished up, to be what God intended them to be, which often included pain and testing in their lives. *Life experiences, afflictions, trials, tests—they can all burnish us.* And she suddenly remembered Isaiah 48:10. “Behold, I have refined you, but not like silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction.”

Trying very hard to put thoughts of her dreams out of her head until after the service, Vini was largely successful, and got a lot out of the pastor's message, which was about Jehoshaphat, a very uplifting and beautiful lesson about trust, worship, praise, and victory.

On Sunday afternoon, with her dad and Preston going fishing, and her mother sewing, Vini decided to go to the mansion to do some research. Whenever she visited the libraries at a time when Violet and Dave weren't expecting her, she of course always called first, to make sure it was okay to come to their home.

With Dave giving her the okay to come, she walked to the mansion, her thoughts on the way occupied by Ben; well, on both of the twins actually. Though very puzzled as to why Ben had taken her binder, and wanting to ask him about it, something was telling her to be very cautious, and take her time. *Just because he took it, doesn't mean he's possessed,* she told herself. *Whether he is or isn't, I need to wait until I know the time is right.* She had already been praying about the issue, and she felt this was what God was telling her to do—be patient and wait. So she would.

Both Sugar Bear and Violet were on the back porch to greet Vini when she arrived. After visiting with them for a few moments, she made her way to the upstairs library where she spread books and journals out on one of the large tables.

In one of her late employer's journals containing a lot of information about firebirds, Mrs. Doyle had quoted Matthew 10:16.

“Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” After the quote, the journal notes were something of a jumble, basically just a list of ideas, or a progression of ideas.

“Firebirds are shapeshifting. I once saw one as small as a sparrow; then it grew to about the size of a large hawk. Their flames might be for cleansing and purifying. They are not exactly what we might expect, which is why I think they might be more related to doves than to either falcons or hawks. Doves are symbolic of pureness and innocence. Firebirds might be the key to finding dragons, because they are thought to be able to control them. Dragons are mostly hotheads (no pun intended) and get out of control easily. The firebirds can perhaps train and polish them, to be worthy of service to God, in the same way human beings are polished to be worthy of service to God, becoming more like His Son, as we are meant to over the course of our lifetimes. With God all things are possible for human beings, even things like telepathy and the raising of the dead.”

Boy, this is a lot to take in all at once, Vini decided.

Because a lot of Mrs. Doyle’s journals focused on dragons, the next section in the journal was about sky serpents. Again, it was mainly just a list of ideas.

“The fire of sky serpents is divine, rather than from hellfire, which is why they can hold back hellfire. Their fire is controlled, not out of control, related to love not to anger. (God is love, while Satan is anger.) Dragons might be more bird than reptile. In a manner similar to how birds puff up to stay warm, once, when caught in the Antarctic for a long period of time, a dragon puffed up to stay warm.”

Vini’s journal reading was suddenly interrupted by a terrific ruckus springing up somewhere behind the mansion that sounded like banging on metal, splintering of wood, and something crashing around, all mixed with loud Sugar-Bear barking, and terrific yowls and yelps from what sort of creature she couldn’t even imagine.

Speeding downstairs, she met Violet, waked from a nap, running down the hall from the parlor. Dave wasn't home, having gone grocery shopping.

Rushing out onto the back porch together, Vini and Violet paused to take in the frenzied scene in the garden

Sugar Bear was in the process of giving a hobgoblin a beating with his bucket, while Pizzo and Heike were throwing rocks at the nasty creature, and hitting their marks quite easily, which was what was causing most of the yowling. An enmourse stood calmly by, having already done his part by exposing the hobgoblin, who had been disguised as a tree stump.

A short while earlier, Pizzo had sensed something wrong in the garden; but knowing that it was something he couldn't see to find, he had gone to fetch both Heike and the enmourse. The trolls had then led the enmourse through the little puck-sized tunnel running from under Mr. Galloway's gazebo to the basement of the mansion. The pudgy, fluffy creature had, thankfully, just fit through the passageways. With both Heike and Pizzo shoving him up the slippery old coal chute and out into the garden, the enmourse, again, had barely fit. But he had just managed to fit, after which, he tottered and sniffed his way around the garden to finally expose the hobgoblin posing as the stump, whereupon, Sugar Bear had decided to take things in hand, or mouth, actually, in grabbing up his bucket and tearing across the lawn to deal the hobgoblin as many hard whacks with it as he could. The Saint Bernard had also felt the evil presence of the creature, but hadn't been able to make him out until the enmourse exposed him.

After only a few startled moments of looking on, Violet and Vini raced into the yard to help route the beast. This was the same one that had attacked Louetta in the spring; and when in full hobgoblin form, the creature was nearly the size of a small sheep. Of course, he looked nothing like a sheep, with his lumpy body a nasty greenish-gray color, and his skin having the appearance of being cracked and scaly. He also had pointy ears, glowing orange eyes, sharp fangs, and long claws.

Grabbing a rake and a shovel respectively, from where the tools were leaned up against the garden shed, Vini and Violet flew at the creature, who quickly fled. While the hobgoblin might have been able to hold his own against a Saint Bernard and two puck trolls, adding two

humans wielding garden tools to the mix definitely tilted the odds away from his favor. Plus, unknown to the humans, because the pitch of it was too high for their ears to hear, the enormouse had just let loose a war cry. With the squeal of this siren-like cry painfully piercing his ears, the hobgoblin decided to flee.

Scaling the ivy on a section of hedge very near the side gate—and ripping some of the vines off in his scrambling, with Sugar Bear (having dropped his bucket for the moment) nipping at his heels—the hobgoblin hoisted himself over the wrought-iron fence to land on the sidewalk and take off running toward the alley. Although he had been run off once before, he had returned upon hearing that a gremlin had taken up residence in the shed he had once occupied. Being jealous and possessive of any places they’ve inhabited, hobgoblins often returned to drive other creatures away from their former residences. Coming back expressly to drive away the gremlin, if there was one, he was very upset to have failed. However, given the opposition he had met, he wasn’t planning to come back anytime soon.

A gremlin was indeed in the shed, invisible to human beings, as all gremlins are, and expertly camouflaged to other creatures that might happen to look his way. And fortunately for the gremlin, the enormouse hadn’t gotten close enough to him to expose his presence. This would turn out to be fortunate for Vini as well because the gremlin happened to be a move by Etowa, and was in the shed for a very special reason.

While Vini and Violet were both a little shaken, the incident hardly seemed to faze Sugar Bear, Heike, Pizzo, and the enormouse, who basically took it all in stride. In short time, after having a drink from his water bowl, Sugar Bear ran around the garden with the enormouse, exploring and sniffing things. After having a snack in the kitchen, Pizzo and Heike came back out into the garden, to lead the enormouse, who was in the process of having a drink of water from Sugar Bear’s bowl, back down the coal chute and through the tunnel to return to Mr. Galloway’s property.

Dave made it home shortly after that, at which point, Vini started for home. She could sense Tulko somewhere nearby. Having heard from a gargoyle that a hobgoblin was in the area, he was determined to step up his watch over her.

Mr. Galloway was outside when Vini passed his house; and she stopped to hear his news as to what had happened to Frank Wharton as a result of his arrest for the topiary vandalism, the court hearing to determine his punishment having taken place on Friday.

“He spent at least a couple of days in jail before his mother was able to bail him out,” Mr. Galloway said. “Now, he’s on probation for a year, and he’s ordered to pay nearly four thousand dollars in damages. Plus, the judge fined him another two hundred dollars for mouthing off in court. We had an arborist assess the value of a yew tree that size. Yew trees grow only about a foot a year, and this one was well over twenty feet high, so I actually thought the arborist came in a little low with his assessment. But they figure two thousand to purchase one about that size, have it transported and planted, then another eighteen hundred dollars or so to have it looked after for a couple of years, plus insurance on it for that time to get it established.”

“Wow, that’s a lot,” Vini said, somewhat astounded that the damages had run that high.

Nodding, Mr. Galloway responded, “Well, yews are a long-lived tree, and considered valuable. But aside from the court decision, I’ve been praying for Frank. Even though I’m sad about the yew, I know everything really does happen for a reason. I think this might be God’s way of trying to get through to Frank, and I am hoping that it does work to set him straight.”

Chapter Fourteen

Print Doubles

October was much like September and seemed to fly by. Coming up on Halloween, the air had a definite cold snap to it. Without much of a fall season this far South, summer often jumped right into winter.

When doing research in the downstairs library on a Sunday afternoon, in an old book, Vini was amazed to find information about magical creatures called burnished doves. Not only that, but in the very same paragraph the writer mentioned wind horses, comparing them to the burnished doves in being creatures very few people would ever hear about or see due to their excellent camouflage abilities. *But I've seen what I think are burnished doves*, she thought, *and they are much easier to see than Tulko, because it's almost impossible to see the wind.*

The writer of the book went on to say that the powers of burnished doves were completely unknown, but speculated that the creatures were fierce and ready for battle, though what type of battle was anybody's guess. In a chapter near the end of the book, Vini found information that coincided with some of her own thinking regarding burnishing as polishing and cleansing; and a paragraph specifically mentioned sanctification in comparing the burnished doves to humans who, when tested and tried by God, become more Christlike.

"Human beings need polishing," the writer said, "because we are highly flawed. However, flaws sometimes make people more interesting. Plus, God takes imperfection and makes perfection. And He doesn't expect us to be perfect right away; He makes us more perfect as we surrender, trust, and obey Him. But we must be wary of what lies beneath the polish and sheen because appearances can often be deceiving."

Taking a break, Vini discovered Violet and Pizzo in the parlor, just about laughing their heads off, which was very odd for the little troll because he was generally something of a sourpuss. Evidently, Violet had knitted Pizzo a tiny pair of socks that were actually a little too big

for him but that he could wear while sleeping if his feet got cold. Well, Pizzo had decided to try his awakening magic on the socks, because he thought it might be funny to see them run around on their own. But it hadn't quite worked like it might with artistic creations because the socks were more crafty than artistic. So the socks, while lying flat on the coffee table, were simply turning slowly in circles, side by side, as though they were each sitting on the turntable of a record player. Oddly enough, one was turning clockwise, and the other counterclockwise.

"It makes sense that they would turn in different directions," Violet said, "since one is for the left foot and the other for the right."

With a final snort of laughter, Pizzo grabbed up the socks and ran off with them to his den.

Working on a little scarf for the troll, Violet told Vini, "If he does his magic on this, I hope it doesn't strangle him."

Placing his socks, which had lost their movement, on the foot of his bed, Pizzo thought he might try putting them into a bagical. There was at least one that he knew of in the neighborhood. (He could generally sense powerful magical objects quite easily, if they were within a couple of miles of his location.)

However, he might have to think awhile before doing this, to be wise. While they might only end up turning into socks that could run around on their own, what if they turned into something else, something not so fun? In the end, Pizzo decided he probably would not put his new socks into a bagical because he knew that powerful magical objects were not for personal use, at least, that wasn't what bagicals were for.

At home in the evening, while the family was playing Scrabble together, Preston started talking about one of his comic books that he had just finished reading. Vini wasn't listening closely because she wasn't particularly interested in what he was rambling on about, something about a society becoming complacent, with too much technological help, and being ripe for conquest by invading aliens. She frequently tuned out his words because she didn't very often think he had much important to say. Though it was rather rude not to listen, Vini didn't feel badly about mostly ignoring him because her parents didn't seem to be paying much attention to his rambles either.

On Monday afternoon, Vini's mother came home from work with an incredible story, which she related to the family while they were

having dinner. Having been recently laid off from her part-time job as a clerk in a law office, Mrs. Aberdeen had been substitute teaching three and four days a week at an elementary school near their home, which she found she liked even better than her previous job because it afforded her more flexibility and better hours.

Evidently, something quite astonishing had happened relating to taking kids' fingerprints at the school. All grade-school children had their fingerprints taken and entered into a database, this being a state program connected to a federal program designed specifically to aid in recovery of children who might have been abducted. This was a common practice now, and had helped authorities find many missing children, especially those taken across state lines. When being enrolled in any new school, kids would automatically have their prints taken and entered into the database; thus, serving to identify any that had been reported as missing.

Evidently, a kid named Brian Spelling in third grade, who had moved to the area the year before, hadn't had his prints taken when the print technician came to his school the previous year because he had been out with the flu. Being added to the list of newbies to the school, they had just taken his fingerprints, which were then added to the database.

"This was last week," Mrs. Aberdeen told her family. "Well, his prints came up as matching those of a boy named Bobby Wilson abducted two years ago in another state. So today, the police and an actual FBI agent showed up just before classes started. Brian's mother was at the school right away, the police having picked her up. His dad was evidently out of town. Anyway, Mrs. Spelling was hysterical and crying in thinking someone was trying to take her kid away. She sort of reminded me of a mother bear, ready to claw and fight if necessary to protect her son; but a crying mother bear. Even Brian was crying. And they were both saying this was some sort of mistake, or some horrible joke. She had his birth certificate and a lot of photos of him all the way from babyhood to now."

After having a bite of hamburger and a sip of water, while her family waited with bated breath, Mrs. Aberdeen continued. "The school agreed to print Brian again; and while they were doing so, the other mother showed up, the one whose kid was abducted. They had

evidently contacted Mrs. Wilson yesterday, and she caught a plane last night to get here. She ended up being hysterical too because she could tell this was not her son; and she right away told them this didn't look anything like the photos or the aged photos, and that it had only been two years, so Bobby would probably look a lot the same. Like Mrs. Spelling, she thought this was some horrible joke being played on her. At the end of her spiel, she was actually shouting and crying. After yelling at the FBI agent about his carelessness in not even checking the photos, she told Mrs. Spelling, 'I didn't come to take your child. I want my own child back!' Well, while crying, the two mothers ended up hugging each other. As I was heading off to class, Mrs. Wilson was still yelling at the FBI agent. 'How could you make a mistake like this?! How could you get my hopes up; I thought Bobby had been found?!'"

After another couple bites of hamburger, Mrs. Aberdeen went on. "Of course, no two people can have the same fingerprints. And when they retook Brian's, they didn't match the ones in the database belonging to Bobby. Of all the people involved—the print technician, the school people, and the police—no one could understand how this could have happened, this terrible mix-up. They could only imagine it was some computer glitch. And the school principal, of course, started worrying about a lawsuit. Also, the card on which the prints were taken last week was missing from the file. They always keep the paper prints, for a while at least. So there is still a lot of mystery at this point, with everyone still baffled. However," she added, smiling a little mischievously, "and this is the really good part of the story. The FBI agent was driving Mrs. Wilson to the airport just before lunch, and they passed a city park in which a bunch of home-school kids were playing; and one of those kids was Bobby. Mrs. Wilson recognized her son right away. He's now in protective custody, and will be going home soon. The people here that he was living with had gone through one of those fly-by-night adoption agencies, one that evidently steals children, to adopt Bobby. The new parents were told that his parents died in a car crash, and that's what they told Bobby. They kept his first name the same but had given him their last name, Hamilton, I think."

"That's incredible!" Mr. Aberdeen remarked. "They found a kid missing from another state for two years all because of some weird fingerprint mix-up."

Vini and Preston also thought it pretty amazing.

On Saturday morning, Charlie was again at the mansion, again cooking a few things for Violet, who would be hosting a Bunko gathering with ladies from her church on the upcoming Tuesday, and who wanted a few extra-special goodies made for the event. While making cheese twists and layered chocolate-mint cookies, Charlie saw an image in the refrigerator door of something absolutely beautiful, so much so that she almost couldn't believe what she was seeing. In addition to being beautiful, the image seemed slightly familiar to her, though it was not something she had ever seen before, but more like something she had maybe read about. *A gigantic tree...and a river...*...she mused.

But even with her mind puzzling over it all the while she was cooking and cleaning up after, she couldn't quite figure out why the tree and river might be familiar.

Sitting in the garden with Vini in the afternoon, Charlie didn't mention her vision; not that she would have had much of a chance to because Vini did most of the talking. With both girls' schedules being super packed during the week, they hadn't been able to have lunch together since Monday, so Vini was anxious to tell Charlie about what had happened at the elementary school with the fingerprints.

In order to hopefully recover more stolen children, the FBI and police needed to be careful while making arrests of the people running the bogus adoption agency, so there hadn't been anything on the news yet about this issue. Since there was a real fear that those who had adopted children through this agency might run, taking the kids with them, the media had agreed not to publicize anything until the authorities gave them the okay to do so. Using information confiscated from the adoption agency, one additional recovery of a stolen child, a girl, had already been made in a neighboring state.

While Vini was definitely excited about parents being reunited with their abducted children, she found her thoughts more focused on the issue of the fingerprints. "I can see Satan using something like this as a deception in the world," she told Charlie.

"What do you mean?" Charlie asked.

"Well, he's convinced a lot of people that he doesn't exist, when he does. He's convinced people that the bible is full of mistakes, when it

isn't. He convinces people to follow their feelings and not God's commands, and not even their heads most of the time. And he is constantly attacking believers, tempting us and trying to get us to turn to evil. He's supernatural, and powerful, and I could see him giving an evil person the fingerprints of an innocent person, so that the innocent person would be convicted of a crime, like murder or theft. I've read about doppelgangers, lookalikes that Satan has created to commit crimes so that God's children will be blamed. The book I read about doppelgangers talked about assassins that impersonate others so that the people who get caught and convicted are not the people who did the actual killings."

"But in this case," Charlie responded, "the outcome was good. The issue of the fingerprints put the FBI agent and the mother of Bobby in exactly the right place at the right time to find him. So this seems like it was divine, not evil."

"True," Vini said, "but still, I think Satan could have something like this up his sleeve."

"He might, but no two people can have the same fingerprints."

"Except that nothing is impossible or too hard for God," Vini answered. "If this was divine intervention, God could have briefly changed Brian's fingerprints to match Bobby's to bring this about, or just manipulated the database information."

"Agreed," Charlie said, smiling. "And it's wonderful that He did. But, I feel a little sorry for Brian and his mother, what they went through. That had to have been pretty traumatic."

"Yes, but if Brian and his mother had to be put through something of a trauma to get a missing kid back to his family, so be it," Vini said. "I think it would probably be worth it. We are sometimes meant to bear pain in this life if it will benefit others."

At home and reading the bible, as she thought about things like deceptions and divine interventions, Vini remembered the quote about being tried in the furnace of affliction. *So it might have been like a test for someone*, she thought. *Maybe God is polishing up Brian or his mother now, so that they can become something more in the future.*

Opening the bible randomly, James 1:2-4 met her eyes. "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness

have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

In thinking about Mr. Galloway’s recent troubles, both being taken to court and then the vandalism, he had seemed to think some good might come out of it, namely, that Frank might get straightened out.

Again letting God lead her to certain passages, she closed and then reopened her bible, where she read part of Romans 5:3-5. “...we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us....”

After looking up several of her favorite quotes pertaining to hope, Vini made a few jottings in her journal on the subject. “Mr. Galloway has a lot of hope. Finding abducted kids gives the world hope. Hope is part of quintessence, which enables me to call unicorns. Jesus is our Blessed Hope. Hope, as Jesus, is the most wonderful thing the world has ever known!”

Chapter Fifteen

Journals and Rainbows

Although full of hope, Vini was about to hear of something totally unexpected, something that would not only shake the fragile hope held by many believers and nonbelievers in the area, but that would also fairly shatter many lives in her community.

In the spring, a local high school boy, who was still a minor, had been convicted only of misdemeanor assault and sentenced only to probation after killing a classmate at school that he had bullied over a prolonged period of time. The public outcry over the light sentence hadn't lasted long, not only due to the campaigns of several rather vocal groups advocating for second chances for minors, but also because the parents of the murder victim had spoken out in favor of forgiveness.

What happened that was unexpected was a retaliation murder (stabbing) of the younger brother of the teen who had killed his classmate, by none other than the grandfather of the original murder victim. Since the brothers were close in age and looked somewhat similar, many people at first assumed that the grandfather had mistakenly killed the wrong person. Not so; in fact, in a lengthy confession letter, the retaliator spelled out very specifically that he had killed the younger brother intentionally because he wanted the bully murderer of his grandson to know what it was like to lose someone, and to have to live with the loss for the rest of his life.

Completely unknown to the rest of his family, the grandfather had begun planning the murder upon hearing the outcome of his grandson's case and seeing the bully in the courtroom, sauntering around and smiling, as though he couldn't care less that he had killed someone. Since the grandfather had kept himself somewhat isolated, citing his grief as the reason he wanted to be left alone, the rest of his family truly hadn't known anything at all about what was being planned, and were all genuinely horrified. Having a good support system, firmly rooted in

their church, they had been well on their way to complete forgiveness and moving on when the stabbing happened.

The grandfather was terminally ill and would end up spending the rest of his days in a prison, one specifically for elderly people with advanced illnesses. But he didn't particularly care because he felt just in his actions. In an official statement issued to the media by his lawyer, he was quoted as saying, "I am not only ready to take my earthly punishment for my actions, I am also ready to meet my Maker."

The whole issue sparked much-heated debate on a myriad of topics. Some wondered how many generations the original bullying, assault, and murder would end up affecting. Others speculated if more retaliation might be on the way by either family or friends of the latest murder victim. And the issue of forgiveness was hotly discussed, with most people, of course, not agreeing with the concept of "an eye for an eye" as far as punishment. However, many people did agree they didn't know for sure what they themselves might do if they were in the grandfather's situation, since unforgiveness—even over offenses deemed much less wrong than murder—was one of the most profound struggles many Christians have to deal with.

Vini's youth group ended up discussing the issue in depth at their next meeting, in specific, the concept that God had allowed this to happen, so it must have happened for a reason. So what might be the reason? Was He possibly teaching the older brother something, about loss? That seemed hard to swallow based on the fact that an innocent had suffered. But was the younger brother truly innocent? From what they were hearing from some of the media, he was something of a bully himself. Would both families be able to find a way to forgive? What was for certain and not debatable was that there seemed no end to the cycles of violence in the world.

Having been very affected when the original murder happened, Vini found herself equally disturbed by this latest turn of events. In the two weeks or so after the retaliation killing, she was very distracted. Almost as though on auto-pilot, she half-heartedly made her way through her usual routines. Losing a water polo match, partly because she was performing below par, she found she didn't particularly care. She also had difficulty focusing on her schoolwork, research, and work. Even

though these were things she usually enjoyed, at present, they all seemed a little pointless. She was sleeping poorly too.

In recognizing that she was having symptoms of depression (not unfamiliar to her), she made a huge effort to get herself back on track by keeping to a strict sleep schedule, which meant not sleeping in even on weekends. She also started forcing herself to eat right and get plenty of exercise. Even when she didn't feel like going to water polo practice, she did. And since her coach was always encouraging cross training, such as jogging and cycling, Vini started riding her bike around the neighborhood in the afternoons, which was something she hadn't done for a while.

As a result of her diligence, she started feeling better fairly quickly, with the boost in both her energy and performance being as noticeable as the air turning much cooler in mid-November.

Happily making her way to the mansion in the early morning on the Saturday that marked just under two weeks until Thanksgiving, Vini was looking forward to having a productive weekend.

In the afternoon, she sat on a bench in the garden to read, bundled up with her grandmother's sweater under her jacket and a muffler coiled about her neck.

She was finally getting into the journal that Violet had found during the scavenger hunt, which she hadn't had time to look at until now. Flipping it open, and turning pages for a couple of minutes to figure out where she might want to start reading (because she often didn't start books at their beginnings), a word penned on the inside back cover drew her attention—*Anei*.

What does that mean?

She somehow knew the answer right away by a thought laid onto her brain. *Anei is a name.*

The message she received was rather short, and very like what she might hear if Tulko was telling her something by thought. But in being very familiar with her protector's thought-voice, she knew this thought definitely wasn't from him.

However, while she didn't recognize the voice, there was something slightly familiar about it, as though she might possibly have heard it before; but she couldn't quite place it at this time.

Casually looking around her, she sent out the thought, *Hello, anyone there?*

When there was no answer, she again focused on the journal, where she quickly noticed something odd. While both she and Violet, at first glance, had assumed the book belonged to Mrs. Doyle's husband, this was not Gerard's handwriting. She had seen enough of his writing in letters and in notebooks full of his research notes in the downstairs library to be able to tell that this writing was smaller, and slightly more slanted. Being certain of this, she didn't even need to go to the subbasement to compare and confirm. *But if not Mrs. Doyle's, and not Gerard's, whose handwriting is this?*

Flipping pages slowly and scanning the shorter entries, she noticed that they basically amounted to a variety of observations. *This is how most people keep journals*, Vini thought, *not filling them with research notes like I do.*

While not paying close attention to the dates, she did notice that the entries were fairly recent, within two years, though none had been made in the past three months.

"A yellow cat had four kittens in a garden shed over on Goldfinch Drive."

A couple of pages later, she read, "A grimmpt observed in the area."
What's a grimmpt?

She didn't ponder the question long because something seemed even stranger about the next entry. "Mrs. Martin has been planting crocus and gladiola bulbs in her back yard. Her oak tree lost a limb in the last storm." Vini knew the Martin family. She also knew that no one could see over the Martins' privacy fence and into their back yard.

So was the writer perched in a tree, or on the roof of the house next door?

"I saw a rainbow this afternoon. Only five of the seven colors were visible, but it was still beautiful."

A longer entry on the next page described a pawn shop robbery a couple of miles from Vini's home. The writer had evidently observed the break-in and described the getaway car in the journal, also stating that the robbers were caught the next day.

Whoever wrote this must have alerted the police, she decided.

"Mr. Galloway is sculpting a beautiful cross out of a yew tree."

Not so beautiful after Frank took a chainsaw to it, Vini thought sadly.

“Squirrels have been fussing with blue jays and mockingbirds in front of the blue house on Paloma. The pear tree on the corner is blossoming.”

So this is someone in this very neighborhood, keeping watch and keeping a journal.

However, she soon decided her assumption might not be correct because the next entry was about something approximately twenty-five miles away. “One of the orangutans got into the sloth paddock last night at the zoo. He just wanted to visit and right away had a nap on a pile of straw before going back to his own paddock a couple of hours later.”

But the zoo is locked up tight at night, and I don't think this person works at the zoo.

After a bit more pondering, she thought, *I don't see how anyone could know some of these things, unless looking down from above?*

With a slightly eerie feeling running across her shoulders and creeping up into the nape of her neck, she wondered if possibly an angel had been keeping this journal. This would make sense because several of the entries she had scanned described church happenings such as baptisms and Christenings. Upon reading a slightly longer entry about a wedding, Vini pondered the possibility that the angel worked as something like a heavenly reporter because some of the notes were reading a lot like short news articles.

“One of the watchmen saved a window washer from a fall last night.”

Here again was a mention of watchmen. And she again might have pondered what exactly the watchmen were, except that she was immediately distracted by the next entry, which actually had something to do with her. And Vini almost couldn't believe what she was reading.

“One of those twin boys working as gardeners at Doyle Mansion took a bible and a notebook from the girl with the wind horse.”

Even with rereading the words, while simply sitting and thinking, her mind took quite a while to absorb this information.

Again flipping pages a couple of minutes later, another entry caught her eye. “I went to check on the other dagger from the set of two. It is

still in its appropriate spot. The girl with the wind horse has only one of the pair. The other is being kept safe for someone else.”

After reading this, Vini suddenly remembered where she had heard the thought-voice that told her Anei was a name before—from the gargoyle that gave her the dagger and told her he had been keeping it for her.

Late Sunday afternoon, she asked Tulko to take her to the top of the church where she had been given the dagger. Though the rooftop contained many gargoyles, the one in question was positioned facing a quiet alley, so Vini’s being on top of the church was unlikely to be noticed by anyone.

Approaching the bird-like reptilian statue with both anticipation and a bit of nervousness, she said, “Hello, Anei, I’m Vini. I’ve been reading your journal, but I guess you probably know that.”

As it turns out, gargoyles could communicate more than just by thought, and Vini was delighted when Anei spoke words aloud to her. “Yes, I know,” he said, smiling cordially at her.

“Violet Nichols found it at Doyle Mansion,” Vini said, “and she gave it to me because I inherited all of Mrs. Doyle’s journals. But I guess maybe I shouldn’t have read it. At first I thought it might have belonged to Mrs. Doyle’s husband.”

“You may keep and read my journal,” Anei responded, while slowly stretching his back and wings. “It might help you find something you are looking for, and possibly something you don’t even know that you are looking for.”

“Thank you,” Vini said, though she didn’t quite know what to make of the last part of what he had said.

“It’s one of the more recent of my journals,” the gargoyle went on, climbing down from his stone plinth to stretch his legs as well, out behind him, one at a time. “I have been recording things for about seventy years, and have filled nearly a hundred journals over the years as I’ve watched the seasons of time pass.”

“Do other gargoyles keep journals?” Vini asked.

“No others that I know of,” Anei replied. “I started journaling because I recognized that I was seeing what the trees were seeing; but they don’t have audible voices, or the ability to write, so I imagined that I was giving them a voice because I can, in a way, hear their voices.”

“Oh, that’s interesting,” Vini responded, and she could well imagine trees having voices that certain beings would be able to hear.

“And I don’t have to be looking directly at something to see what’s happening,” Anei added. “I can actually see things in the eye of my mind. That is a gift given to gargoyles to help them do their job of protecting buildings and even sometimes large regions. But while I don’t have to leave my spot, I sometimes do, just to get out and stretch my legs and wings.”

“Have you always lived here?” Vini questioned.

“No,” Anei answered. “I once lived atop a large manor house on a peanut and cotton plantation. The owners of the house were very religious, so they had a chapel on the estate and gargoyles on top of the house. I came to live here when one wing of the manor burned, the wing I was stationed on. They decided not to rebuild it; they just sealed it off.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that,” Vini said.

“I think it was meant to be because I always wanted to be atop a church or cathedral,” he responded. “And the manor is not too far from here, a little less than forty miles of flying, a bit longer in a car, and probably only about five seconds for a wind horse to reach.” With Vini smiling, he added, “So I can visit sometimes—the other gargoyles on the house, the trees, the neighbors, horses, creeks, stones, and other whatnots.”

“But how did your journal end up at Doyle Mansion?” Vini wondered.

Smiling, Anei told her, “I keep them in many houses, especially ones with secret niches and tunnels and such like. I can’t keep them outside with me forever because there are too many of them to put under my wings for protection during rainy and windy times.”

“I see,” she replied.

“I knew about that specific hidden compartment because another gargoyle told me, one that lived in the area when the house was first built; and I put that particular journal in the wall during the early part of the summer. You weren’t around much then.”

“I was probably at camp,” Vini answered. “Oh, I need to be getting home,” she suddenly realized, as it was nearing dinnertime at her house.

“Thank you for coming for a visit,” Anei told her.

Smiling, Vini bid her new friend farewell before mounting Tulko, who quickly whisked her home.

Reading more of Anei's journal again on Monday evening, Vini remembered what he had said about the book possibly helping her to find something she was looking for. Still flipping around instead of reading straight through, she felt sure that if there was something in the journal that would help her find dragons, God would lead her to it.

While she didn't find anything she felt might lead her to dragons, such as notes about peacocks or doves, she did find an entry relating to the narrow stairs and the safe room at the mansion. "They used to hide people in that secret room at the bottom of those hidden stairs. I wonder if the ones occupying the mansion now will ever find the room, or use it."

So Anei knows more secrets of the mansion than just about the hidden wall niche, Vini thought. I should ask him if he knows where more hidden doors and stairs and tunnels might be found.

A couple of pages later, she did find a note mentioning a dragon; however, she didn't think it would help her find the creatures. "A dragon healed a woman in Scotland; they got the dose right."

Dose...dose of what?

Flipping again, she found a rather vague entry, again about watchmen. "One of the watchmen saved a particular person, but not someone else nearby. What is God up to? This is very puzzling, as to how He works sometimes."

Vini herself didn't puzzle long over this because another entry at the bottom of the same page drew her rapt attention.

"I just found out that a relic of Noah's Ark is in the neighborhood, an actual piece of wood from the ship. That's a pretty special thing to have in the area."

There are lots of relics in the subbasement library, Vini thought, eagerly looking forward to investigating the next day after school, which was when she had planned to be at the mansion next, to do a little cleaning and trading in and out of library books.

However, in looking over all of the artifacts in the downstairs library the next afternoon, she didn't find anything she felt might have been from a large ark.

While dusting the bookshelf in the parlor, she climbed a step stool in order to look closely at Harvey's Ghost.

Though probably not similar to the ark, with her mind on sailing vessels, she wondered what the differences between Noah's Ark and a ship like Harvey's Ghost might be, other than the ark being a lot larger, of course. *Flatter on the bottom, and probably without a keel*, she thought of the ark. However, with her limited knowledge of sea matters, that was all her mind could come up with at present.

When dusting a set of bookends of two small foo dogs that were hard to tell apart, as most pairs of foo dogs were, Ben and Sam suddenly sprang to mind.

Quickly kneeling down, she silently prayed, *Dear Lord, please help me figure out who is possessed, so that I can help both twins, and everybody else too. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.*

Vini truly felt that if she knew who was possessed, she would be able to rid that person of the demon, probably by calling a unicorn. That was her plan anyway.

Going back to dusting, she wondered why God didn't just reveal to her which of the twins was affected.

Surely He knows.

Of course He does; He knows everything, her mind answered. And she suddenly remembered that she often wasn't a good observer of the clues God was constantly providing for her, as guidance.

Again kneeling, she prayed, *Dear Lord, please help me be a good observer. Please help me understand Your will and instructions so that I can move forward. I want to obey; please help me hear Your voice clearly. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.*

As she was rising, she suddenly had the idea that since Anei was keeping watch on the neighborhood, he might know who was possessed.

But wouldn't he have told me, if he knew? she pondered. *Surely he would have wanted to warn me.* Returning to dusting, she thought, *With all of the wondering over things like Noah's Ark, possession, and hidden stairs, I might have a whole list of questions to ask Anei the next time I see him.*

Though busy, Vini did manage a visit to the gargoyle on Thursday evening, Tulko again taking her.

“No, I don’t know of anyone in the area possessed at this time,” he answered her first query. “And you think it’s one of those twin boys?”

As Vini nodded, he said, “If that is so, I can’t tell. But demons are experts at hiding, even when occupying or possessing humans.”

From their discussion, she learned that Anei held the same concept regarding occupying versus possessing that she had discovered as a general opinion from her research—that the main difference had to do with how much control over their victims demons either chose or were able to exert.

“Some people are able to resist demon control more than others,” Anei said. “An occupied person still has some control, and might not even be aware of the demon. A fully possessed person will have no control, and he or she likely will be aware of the invasion. But an occupied person may become a possessed person, especially if they find they can no longer resist the invasion.”

With Vini nodding her understanding, he went on. “Demons don’t usually show themselves to gargoyles. We’re too religious, kind of like crosses and bibles, and they know that death likely follows. I basically just have to grab hold of one, and he’ll dissipate. I think most gargoyles are kind of blessed, like holy water. We’re also at least as fast as demons, so it’s not too much trouble to catch one.” With Vini obviously engrossed, Anei added, “They have to be careful about mirrors too, even small ones, because mirrors reflect light. You know they can’t take too much light because it burns them up. And mirrors don’t reflect darkness, only light.”

When she next thought to ask about the Noah’s Ark relic, Anei smiled as he replied, “I can’t just tell you everything. That’s not how it works; at least, it’s not the way God wants it to work. So in the same way that you found unicorns, you’ll just have to be patient and diligent.”

Vini wasn’t particularly surprised that Anei knew she had found unicorns, since he was probably constantly watching the goings on in the neighborhood.

“Of course, sorry I asked,” she replied.

“Don’t be sorry; it’s not a crime to ask questions. That’s how we learn, by questioning.” Going on, his tone held a slight bit of mischief. “You know, sometimes the answers might be under our very noses; but

I have found through experience that it's often best to let people discover things for themselves, instead of pointing them out."

Deciding she would likely get the same response regarding the secrets of the mansion, and recognizing that Anei was right, Vini didn't ask about hidden staircases and doors. She also decided not to ask what a grimmpt was at this time, because the question would keep. Plus, she felt this was probably something she could find out herself through her research.

After Vini left, Anei sat thinking. He hoped he wasn't giving her too much information in letting her read his journal, and in answering her questions. Indeed, as he pondered, he realized he hadn't spoken this many words to any human being in the last eighty-seven years. Words simply weren't necessary to do his job of protecting his assigned building and the surrounding area of malevolent factors such as thieves and evil spirits; therefore, his loquaciousness with Vini quite surprised him. But she was quite an exceptional human being, and one he quite admired, so the extra sharing was somewhat understandable.

Walking to work on Saturday morning just after a light rain, with the sun coming out, Vini saw a lovely rainbow that was somewhat distant but that appeared to be framing the mansion as she approached. Seeing the rainbow reminded her of Noah's Ark.

With the light of the sun shining on her, she once again thought about the reason she might have needed to find unicorns before finding dragons. *Unicorns have great light, or are partly made of light. Light makes a rainbow possible. And rainbows are somehow connected to dragons.* With these ideas in place, her brain once again led her to wonder somewhat fancifully if the glow at the end of a rainbow might not be a pot of gold, but a dragon instead. *Then all we have to do is follow a rainbow to find a dragon. So rainbows might be like markers, marking the places of dragons in the world. Tulko could take me to the end of a rainbow.* Although she knew she hadn't really worked out anything completely true about finding dragons, her brain was having fun imagining these things.

After cleaning in the morning and having lunch, Vini traded out a couple of books in the downstairs library, after which, she looked up grimmpt in a book that was something like an index of magical creatures, giving brief descriptions of each.

“A grimmpt is a fairly small creature that is perhaps the equivalent of a magical bloodhound, capable of sniffing out certain things. For instance, if a person has something that was once in a bagical, the grimmpt might be able to sniff out the location of the bagical itself; that is, if he isn’t distracted by sniffing out sweet potatoes and zucchini, two of his favorite foods. Red grapes have also been known to cause distraction. Grimmpts can perform other bloodhound-like tasks as well, such as finding missing children by first sniffing an article of their clothing, then hunting for and following the trail.”

With no drawing of a grimmpt in the book, Vini was picturing a small dog-like creature.

This particular weekend was a special one for Ben and Sam because their uncle had decided that it was a good time to reveal the twins to everyone, first neighbors and their church family during the weekend, before making it official at their school on Monday.

With Ben being the one who was “new” to most people, he would have to be somewhat careful, at least for a while, not to let on that he knew too much about the community and specifics about certain people of their acquaintance. And he would find it quite fun to be introduced to and get to know people he already knew because it was like having a blank slate. So if there was ever a time he had done something embarrassing or slightly impolite, all of these things were erased, and he could start over. (Sam actually ended up being a little jealous of this “clean start” of his brother.)

As far as the plausibility of their story, people had no trouble buying the explanation that Ben had been living with his elderly grandfather in another state, until the grandfather passed away recently. While Mr. Dellinger had known about Ben, he had kept this information private, just within the family, because separating siblings, especially twins, was not very highly thought of when making custody arrangements.

The twins and their uncle had also come up with an explanation, if anyone were to ask, as to the reason the boys had nearly identical small scars—this was just one of those weird identical twin things. Though living in different states, they had had similar experiences, probably

divinely arranged through the cosmos. Though whimsical, in Mr. Dellinger's experience, people tended to believe these sorts of things.

For all of their worrying and preparation for the reveal, no one even questioned; not anything. And since the twins' uncle had most of their official paperwork done already, both boys already having birth certificates and social security numbers, nothing caused a problem logistically either. With no initial stumbling blocks, the plan going forward was simply to treat the boys as two people, and answer any questions just as they went along.

Violet ended up setting up an annuity account to help pay for part of Ben's college due to the fact that when Mrs. Doyle had set up similar accounts for Vini, Charlie, Preston, and Sam, she hadn't been able to do so for Ben because the twins weren't publically two people yet.

Vini was doing research on Wednesday afternoon at the mansion, and specifically looking up rainbows. Anei's journal entry mentioning the seven colors in a rainbow had made her remember a note in one of Mrs. Doyle's journals. Not initially thinking it might be important, she hadn't written down which journal it was in, so it took her a while to find it.

"Here it is," Vini breathed in relief.

The note simply said, "'The Magnificent Seven' is an interesting fable about a peacock and a rainbow." Vini was familiar with the western movie, *The Magnificent Seven*, but had never heard of a fable by the same name. But, of course, she knew that some titles, even popular ones, ended up being used more than once.

With a stack of books filled with fables in front of her, she found what she was looking for in less than an hour, which ended up being a fable called, "The Wondrous Seven." Either Mrs. Doyle had read it in a different book under a different name, or she had gotten mixed up. With as much reading as Vini often did, she knew how easy it was to get mixed up sometimes.

Unfortunately, this was simply a summary description of the fable, not "The Wondrous Seven" itself. And even with looking through the stack of books again, she was never able to find the entire fable.

Oh well, she thought, rereading the summary.

“A magical peacock once performed a task for God, using its gift of alchemy and all seven colors of the rainbow. In short, the peacock created and burnished seven doves, each for a specific purpose, and each holding one of the colors of the rainbow. The tasks these magical doves would eventually perform would be most wondrous; in fact, some people conjecture that they might have been used to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, or sink Atlantis, or cause Mount Vesuvius to erupt and wipe out Pompeii. Another speculation is that the indigo dove is the most powerful and the leader of the others, but this might only be based on the fact that peacocks have a lot of indigo in their feathers and therefore favor that color above others.”

Though the whole idea was interesting, Vini was most fascinated by the word “burnished” being used. While this discovery hadn’t led her directly to dragons, she did feel she had somehow found another small piece of the puzzle.

Reading a little more in Anei’s journal, she found another mention of a rainbow. “The crazy lady living in the rainbow house with all of the birds just got another parrot to add to the menagerie. I hope she can afford to feed them all; otherwise, they might end up eating her.”

Vini knew exactly which house Anei was referring to, on Mallard Circle, this being the most colorfully-painted house in the area. While the color scheme made it somewhat of a crazy house, Vini had never met the “crazy lady” and didn’t know that she kept birds as pets.

Since it was only a short detour, Vini decided to have a look at the house on her way home, where she delightfully took in the loveliness of it. Though some people might have considered it garish, the bright colors made Vini think of a beautiful garden in full bloom and fully lit up by God’s light shining upon it, this being enhanced in her thoughts by the presence of a lovely metal cross hung beside the front door right next to a small sign indicating that Ms. Russard was a palm reader. A large cage containing a parrot was hung on one end of the covered porch. As Vini rang the doorbell, the bird looked quizzically at her.

With no answer to the bell, Vini would not have the opportunity to meet the owner of the rainbow house at this time. However, as she was leaving, she noticed a concrete statue of a sleeping dragon on the porch just under the parrot’s cage, the sight of which made her determined to

come back sometime, maybe to have her palm read by Ms. Russard, just for fun, because Vini knew that any real information about her future would come from God, if He wanted her to know certain things.

Heading home, in glancing back at the house, she noticed a metal peacock wind sculpture on the front lawn that tipped slowly forwards and backwards with the wind, as though pecking the ground. *Here once more was a peacock and a dragon together.* In leaving Mallard Circle, if Vini had glanced back again, she would have seen a small indigo-colored dove sitting on the roof of Ms. Russard's porch.

That night Vini dreamed again of the five doves, who were simply sitting on the fence of the mansion, seemingly waiting patiently for something to do, or something to happen. In looking up at the sky in her dream, she saw a soft rainbow stretched out overhead, this particular bow not extending to the earth on either end.

The next evening at home, on her bed with a pile of books and journals surrounding her, she pondered the dream, specifically thinking about the colors of the doves in connection to the rainbow. Though the doves were earthier in color, they definitely corresponded to the bow.

Five colors, she mused, violet, orange, red, indigo, and green. Except that two are missing, blue and yellow, to make up the exact colors of a rainbow.

In remembering that Professor Fulhausen's story about the Rain Dragon included a rainbow, she suddenly realized that the two missing colors were the colors of the two dragons that were off sleeping amongst the stars because they had already performed their tasks. She also recalled something the professor had said at the teatime, about how a peacock once gave some of his power to a group of doves, to armor them in some way for some special purpose. And what she made of this was that magical doves, not firebirds, were likely in control of dragons. People who thought firebirds controlled dragons were probably confused. With fire being related to dragons, this would be an understandable mix-up.

That's why the doves would need to be so fierce, she further decided. They would have to be able to control dragons. And it seems like there would be one for each dragon, except that two are missing, the two that have already fulfilled their purpose. So the missing doves are probably with their dragons, maybe still watching over them as they

sleep, and keeping them company. It makes sense that the birds would still want to stay near them.

She also thought about how, in the bible, a dove was often a symbol of Christ. And a dragon was associated with our Savior's birth, acting as the guiding star. A dove was connected with Noah's Ark too, as having brought the olive branch back to indicate land was uncovered. And a dragon helped cause the flood.

But where are the other five dragons hiding in the world of today while waiting? With less dragon sightings in her research than other magical creatures, she felt dragons might be incredibly scarce. Had there possibly only ever been seven, and now only five remaining?

Focusing her mind back on the doves, since they seemed to be most prominent in her dreams, she thought, *If I connect with the doves somehow, maybe they will lead me to the dragons. So I should be looking for doves, not dragons. I've probably been missing seeing the doves because I've been focusing on dragons.*

Just before going to sleep, Vini read a few more pages in Anei's journal; and she found herself wondering over what he had told her—that the book might help her find something she was looking for. Since one of his notes mentioned a rainbow, she hoped the journal might contain clues leading her to either magical doves or dragons. She fell asleep wondering over the other part of what he had said too—that the journal might help her find something she didn't know she was looking for. *Did he mean the Noah's Ark relic?*

Waiting for the school bus the next morning, Vini saw a beautiful double rainbow, which she took as a sign from God. In putting this together with the two main things she had been wondering over recently, dragons and the Noah's Ark relic, she felt it would make sense for Him to send her a double message, basically two promises in one, that He would continue to lead her forward on both of these quests.

Chapter Sixteen

Zapor and Folto

With schools scheduled to be closed the entire upcoming week for Thanksgiving, Friday was an early-out day. Upon arriving home, after depositing her gym bag in her room, Vini walked to the mansion to get an early start on her weekend work so that she could also fit in a lot of research. Passing Mr. Galloway's yard, she noticed that the damaged yew tree was already starting to grow back and, oddly enough, was splitting into two at the top, forming something of a natural cross, albeit an uneven one at present.

Having tea in his gazebo, Mr. Galloway hurried across the lawn to talk to Vini. "It's amazing the way it's growing," he stated, indicating the yew. "I might make another cross out of it in the future, but for now I just want to see what it does on its own. It's looking very unique already."

"It is a very interesting shape," Vini agreed.

Mr. Galloway had already started making a cross out of another yew tree, about ten feet in height, and one that was closer to the house so he could keep an eye on it better.

After cleaning two bathrooms and folding laundry, with almost two hours before she was expected home for dinner, Vini spent a little time in the downstairs library. Ruffling through a cabinet, she found an old sketching pad that had evidently once belonged to Mrs. Doyle because her name was written on the back of it. About a third of the pad was filled with charcoal and colored-pencil drawings, mainly of beauties in nature such as flowers and trees. *I didn't know she liked to draw*, Vini thought.

One of the last sketches she came to was of two gryphons sitting side-by-side and looking very life-like, almost as though a real pair had posed for the picture. Indeed, Vini could imagine the creatures sitting patiently, waiting for Mrs. Doyle to finish the details of their golden feathers, and get their sharp talons just the right lengths.

Two names were penciled in at the bottom of the drawing. “Zapor and Folto,” Vini murmured. “Pretty names for very pretty creatures.” Although it wasn’t obvious in any specific anatomical way, because one gryphon was slightly larger and stockier than the other, she got the idea that Zapor was a boy and Folto a girl.

Vini was so taken with the drawing that she took a break from researching doves, peacocks, and dragons in order to look up gryphons; and the information she found was truly fascinating. In addition to the physical characteristics of strength and speed, gryphons were great thinkers, able to impart wisdom to those who were able hear their voices. Evidently, fools were not able to hear the voices of gryphons, even if a gryphon was yelling. There was even a well-documented case of a foolish man being unable to hear shouts of warning from a gryphon before falling into an open manhole. Additionally, like thunderbirds, the creatures were thought to act as messengers for angels.

In pondering the names, Zapor and Folto, Vini suddenly remembered a couple of notes in Mrs. Doyle’s journals that were puzzling, but that she hadn’t thought of again until now; and she looked up one she had read fairly recently. “I saw Z today. He seems to be getting used to his new assignment and his new charge. But he told me, F, not so much. Well, she’ll just have to get used to the change because there’s nothing that can be done about it. And, it’s important work. Z agrees with me on this.”

Vini had assumed Mrs. Doyle was writing about people but didn’t want to specifically name them. Or, since she knew who she was talking about, and this was her own personal journal, she didn’t feel the need to write out the full names. Vini now felt almost certain that her former employer was writing about Zapor and Folto. This note also meant that Vini had been correct in her assumption as to their genders.

Charlie had once speculated that Mrs. Doyle had a magical creature attached to her and that it was a gryphon. At the time, possibly because they were in a group setting, Mrs. Doyle hadn’t commented on the speculation. However, Vini knew that Charlie was a very intuitive person, and gifted in many ways more than just her cooking, this being true even before she started seeing visions of the future in reflective surfaces.

Ever since the trip into the past, Vini had been pondering something—although she couldn't talk to her former employer, she could talk to someone who had been a close friend to her, namely, Mrs. Ellis. On a whim (one that seemed very correct), Vini called Mrs. Ellis before leaving for home to ask if she could come for a brief visit, possibly sometime on the weekend.

Delighted to hear from her, Mrs. Ellis agreed to have Vini to her home early the next morning, which was evidently the best time for Mrs. Ellis, who had plans later on Saturday and was busy with church activities on Sunday. This suited Vini just fine as well since she was an early riser and because it would little change her weekend schedule of work and research.

Early Saturday, Vini rode her bicycle to Mrs. Ellis' home, which was about two miles from the mansion. Arriving just after seven, she was surprised that Mrs. Ellis had a breakfast of cheese biscuits and grapes laid out for them on the coffee table in her living room. When offered coffee, Vini had a small cup. While she usually didn't drink coffee, she found that she quite liked it, with lots of cream and sugar added, that is.

Deciding that she would be perfectly frank with Mrs. Ellis, and not beat about the bush, Vini said, "I was thinking about you recently. Well, you and Mrs. Doyle, growing up together and being friends most of your lives; and I wondered, by any chance, do you know anything about gryphons, and possibly one called Zapor?" With Mrs. Ellis looking at her both politely and somewhat quizzically, Vini added, "It's just that I found a note in one of Mrs. Doyle's journals. I wasn't snooping," she hurried to assure Mrs. Ellis. "She left me all of her journals."

"Yes, I know," Mrs. Ellis answered smiling. "And I have to tell you, I was a little jealous over that for a bit, since I've been her friend since we were girls. But I realized that you have your whole life still ahead of you to make use of them. I wouldn't have so much time. Except, I'm determined to live to be one hundred," she added, with an even bigger smile. "You know, centenarians are said to be able to see fairies."

"No, I didn't know that," Vini responded, actually very interested in this idea.

“Yes, I read it in a series of fairy books once,” Mrs. Ellis said. “The writer seemed to know what she was talking about. Also, freckles are really fairy kisses.”

Although both ideas sounded a little outlandish, Vini also found them ringing true.

“I’ll tell you about both Zapor and Folto,” Mrs. Ellis said. “Both were attached to Frances her whole life, so it was a long relationship, though she actually didn’t know about them until her teen years.”

Mrs. Ellis must know her stuff, Vini thought, because I didn’t even mention Folto.

After a sip of coffee, Mrs. Ellis went on. “But let me first digress a little because I need to tell you about Frances’ twin sister. Laura was a fraternal twin; but she died when she was a baby, of crib death. That’s what they used to call sudden infant death syndrome. Anyway, the other gryphon was supposed to be her protector. Zapor was assigned to Frances, because God knew she was destined to do great things in her life, so He gave her help and protection. Folto was supposed to do the same for Laura. With Laura’s death, they both just attached themselves to Frances, like double help and protection.”

“I never knew she had a twin,” Vini said, surprised.

“She didn’t either,” Mrs. Ellis responded, “until she was a teenager. But I’ve often wondered...with everything that happened in her life, I wonder if Laura’s death might have been caused by one of those demons that were always after Frances. Yes, I know about demons,” she added. “I imagine you do too.”

With Vini nodding, in earnest, Mrs. Ellis added, “They are still around, the gryphons, I mean. Demons too, I imagine. But I know for certain that Zapor and Folto are around. I saw Folto last year. And the gryphons are cousins, in case you wanted to know.”

Since she did want to know, Vini gave another nod.

“By the way, I know a little about your adventures,” Mrs. Ellis went on, “because Dave and Violet go to my church. Ever since we lost Frances, I’ve been sticking somewhat close to them, when I can. We’re all busy, you see, like a lot of people. But I don’t want to lose touch completely. Frances was like family, so that makes Dave and Violet family too.”

With her guest listening intently, Mrs. Ellis continued. “The gryphons were part of the reason Frances never had a security system installed. She didn’t need one with their protection. However, there was another reason that she didn’t particularly like having a lot of the latest technology and gadgets. Those kinds of things are easy for demons to trip up and manipulate, this being a trick taught to them by Satan; and it’s not just the demons, but the evil sorcerers he has working for him too. They can easily mess with mechanical things and disrupt signals, even bring down planes. If sorcerers were to ever wage war on the rest of us, they could easily render things such as guns and missiles useless. Then people would be forced to use swords and spears and such like. That’s what some people believe will happen in the Endtimes. Things like computers and phones and guns likely aren’t going to work.”

This was all very interesting to Vini, and she was completely absorbed. Not only had she never heard about evil sorcerers working for Satan, or that technology and mechanics might be rendered useless by his powers and those working for him, she also felt everything Mrs. Ellis was telling her held a definite ring of truth.

“I assume you know about the little troll, Pizzo,” Mrs. Ellis said, smiling. To Vini’s nod, she added, “Sweet little thing; well, both sweet and sour. I knew his mother, Deena, who lived at Frances’ house before moving to the mansion.”

So I was right about the puck troll who threw the pin cushion at me, Vini thought with a smile.

After a couple of bites of cheese biscuit, reminiscing, Mrs. Ellis said, “Frances and I went on many adventures. The gryphons would take us. They fly really fast and can carry two people each easily. We found a unicorn whistle once.” When Vini leaned forward, in obvious eager anticipation, in a slightly apologetic tone, Mrs. Ellis added, “It didn’t work for some reason. But Frances was sure it was a unicorn whistle, and she really knew about those sorts of things. We just couldn’t get it to work. There are lots of magical objects in the world, but many of them are very mysterious. I think sometimes people have to be trained to use them.”

While Vini would have liked to have stayed longer, since both she and Mrs. Ellis had plans for the day, she felt it was time to leave.

“Well, I need to let you get started on your day,” she said rising, “and I need to be getting to work. Thank you for the breakfast.”

Declining Vini’s offer to help clear away the plates and cups, Mrs. Ellis said, “I see you brought your backpack with you. Before you go, I want to give you something.” Leaving the room for a couple of minutes, she returned to present Vini with a series of seven hardback mystery books that she had read and enjoyed growing up.

“I want you to have these. You can either keep them for yourself or maybe put them into the library at the mansion,” Mrs. Ellis said, “whatever you decide.” With Vini looking at her in a dumbfounded way, she added, “I got these as a teen using S&H Green Stamps. I assume you know about those; maybe your mother or grandmother told you...or a friend.”

Since Mrs. Ellis was smiling almost knowingly, Vini was almost sure the woman somehow remembered that they had met before, in the fifties.

While neither said anything, Vini did thank Mrs. Ellis earnestly, with both words and a hug.

The books did just fit into her backpack; and on the ride to work, she decided she would place them in the mansion’s upstairs library, so that others could enjoy them too.

Albert and Louetta, who would be visiting for the whole week of Thanksgiving while their parents were traveling, arrived just after lunch. Albert had driven them to the mansion, having just gotten a used car. Unloading her luggage and a few art supplies, Louetta was scolding him for evidently speeding at some point on their journey.

“I didn’t see the sign,” Albert protested, exasperatedly, “because I was distracted by your jabbering!”

Evidently, the trip had not been an entirely pleasant one. However, both brother and sister settled in fairly quickly, Albert by helping Dave with something in his workshop, located in the rear of the mansion’s detached two-car garage. Louetta, at Violet’s request, immediately started doing a large tromp l’oeil painting on the wall spanning most of the back porch, encompassing about ten feet on either side of the large kitchen window. The subject of the mural was a countryside setting of rolling grassy plains dotted by clumps of wildflowers and a scattering of

trees, with a meandering stone fence in the foreground and a small herd of horses frolicking around a pond in the distant background.

By the time Vini returned on Tuesday, her next scheduled work day, the painting was well over half done.

Having been shown the narrow stairs, safe room, and hidden wall niche, Albert and Louetta were sorry to have missed the scavenger hunt, which they mentioned to Vini as they were having lunch with Dave and Violet. Both wanted to explore the tunnel; however, Dave, busy with preparations for the greenhouse, which he hoped to begin constructing early in the new year, hadn't yet determined if the tunnel was safe or not.

The safe room was of particular interest to Louetta. "It will be a much better place to hide than the landing at the bottom of the slide-tunnel," she said, this having been her plan if she ever felt the need to hide from demons.

"It's not just for hiding from demons," Violet said. "I'm planning to use it as a storm shelter." In fact, she had already put water, energy bars, and a battery-powered lantern with spare batteries into the room, which she planned to stock with more items in the near future, her list including things like canned goods, a can opener, freeze-dried food, cots, and blankets.

"But I wonder what they might have used it for in the past," Albert questioned. "Since it wasn't stocked, I don't think it was a storm shelter, unless they took everything out."

"There was stuff stored down there at one time," Violet answered. "I can see marks on the shelves as though they once held canned goods. And there are slight indentations and drag marks on the floors that might have been from cots and chairs."

Remembering what she had read in Anei's journal, about people being hidden in the room, Vini speculated, "Because of what happened to Jewish people during the Holocaust, I think people might have started building secret hide-out rooms into their houses."

"I imagine that room was built earlier than that," Albert offered, "probably when the mansion was first built."

"Not necessarily," Dave replied. "The wood doesn't look that old to me. I think it might have been added as recently as the forties, fifties, or maybe even the sixties."

“I’ve read about listening posts in old houses, just small cubbies,” Louetta said, “where people could sit secluded and spy on their servants by listening to their conversations.”

“Since we can’t explore the tunnel yet, maybe we can do another hunt,” Albert suggested, “like an unofficial one, a non-birthday one this time, and maybe this afternoon.”

“That’s a good idea,” Louetta said, as she was ready to take a break from painting.

“I’m game,” Vini offered.

When Albert and Louetta visited, they always picked up after themselves, as well as doing other cleaning, so Vini had pretty well finished work for the day.

Although Dave and Violet were both busy—Violet cataloging on the computer in the subbasement, and Dave drawing the greenhouse plans on the couple’s other computer set up in the upstairs library—they had no objections to the trio of young people searching again, to their hearts’ content.

Since Albert and Louetta had arrived, Pizzo had been splitting his time between visiting Heike and admiring Louetta’s large mural. At the mansion during the afternoon, he had fun watching the hunt, while snacking on about a gallon each of cashews and butter mints that Louetta had brought for him.

Pizzo actually knew many secrets of the mansion, including quite a few not already discovered by the current owners and their friends and relatives: but instead of just revealing these secrets, he wanted the people to have to do a little work.

However, about two hours into the search, with Louetta frustrated in not being able to find anything, the little troll found he couldn’t stand seeing his best friend so disappointed and forlorn. Therefore, he decided to show her something, and not just a small hidden thing, but something that would end up being pretty spectacular compared to what had been found before.

With Albert and Vini tagging along, Pizzo led Louetta around the outside of the house to the old root cellar, the entrance of which was a small slanting door situated about ten feet to one side of the coal chute leading into the basement. While the root cellar had once been connected to the basement (when used to store fruits and vegetables),

since it hadn't been used for over twenty years, the door from the cellar to the basement had been boarded up and sealed, mainly to keep various critters and insects out of the house.

Louetta had never before wanted to explore what was basically a dirty hole in the ground. But with Pizzo obviously wanting to show her something important, she didn't delay entering. A short flight of stone steps led down into the cellar, which had no lighting; however, Albert and Vini still had the flashlights with them that they had been using for the search. Leaving the slanted door open also let some light in to help with seeing while inside. Thankfully, the ceiling in the cellar was high enough that they didn't bump their heads; though Albert's head, being the tallest, was a near miss.

With Pizzo gesturing, Albert and Vini investigated a row of built-in vegetable bins that, despite being in a slightly rickety state, swung forward quite easily as a unit to reveal a set of wooden stairs leading downwards.

The puck troll actually led the way, nimbly hoisting himself down each of the stairs to reach a tunnel, very similar to the one adjacent to the safe room. Picking Pizzo up and placing him on her shoulder, Louetta followed as Vini and Albert took turns leading the group through the tunnel that was basically straight, only gently meandering on occasion.

Having only the light from the flashlights, they took their time, not only to avoid tripping on things such as roots and rocks, but also because they didn't want to miss anything important. With the air seeming fairly fresh, Vini noticed grates along the walls like those in the tunnel she had explored with Dave and Violet. Echoing Dave's earlier comment, she said, "The tunnel is probably vented to the outside for fresh air."

After creeping along for what seemed to be about thirty-five minutes, or what Albert guessed was probably a little over half a mile, they came upon a set of wooden stairs leading upwards, exactly at a point where the tunnel made a sharp right-hand turn to continue off in another direction.

Climbing the stairs and opening a wooden trap door, they surfaced in an old barn, specifically, inside a large horse stall that was currently empty. In fact, with the exception of a few odds and ends such as old

tools and buckets, the entire barn was empty, and practically falling down. Peeking out through holes in the walls, they saw simply unused farm fields and a few trees. Other than a manger and a water trough, no other structures were visible.

Anxious to explore more of the tunnel, they didn't stay long in the barn. Making their way back down the stairs, they took the right-hand turn to again meander along the tunnel where, about twenty-five minutes later they came to a metal door set into a concrete block wall at the exact point the tunnel took another sharp right-hand turn. Though no lock was visible in the door, they were unable to open it by its metal ring handle; and they reasoned that it was fixed or latched from the other side.

"This might be another safe room," Albert speculated, noting that the concrete block seemed very thick.

From a spot on the ground where Louetta had set him down, Pizzo was gesturing, miming actually; and from his performance, they got the idea of an explosion and someone hiding.

"Oh, a bomb shelter, or fallout shelter," Louetta correctly guessed.

Suddenly remembering her conversation in the fifties with Mr. Templeton, Vini asked, "By any chance, is this bomb shelter on Mr. Galloway's estate?"

Pizzo nodded earnestly, while looking very surprised at Vini's deduction.

Albert and Louetta were also surprised, and Albert asked, "How could you have known that?"

Not wanting to give away her trip into the past, Vini answered, "It just seemed like where we should be, from the turns we've taken."

"I didn't know Mr. Galloway had a fallout shelter," Albert said.

"He might not even know it himself, if it's covered up," Vini said. "It might be really old."

"Oh, I think he probably knows; he's out digging so much," Louetta replied.

Pizzo was nodding because Mr. Galloway did indeed know about the bomb shelter.

Taking the next right-hand turn to explore more of the tunnel, within only about a hundred feet, they came to a cave-in, which Vini correctly speculated was the same cave-in she had discovered with Dave

and Violet. “So this tunnel goes back to the mansion and ends up by the safe room and narrow stairs,” she said.

Piszo again nodded, while squatting down to etch something into the soft dirt at the edge of the floor of the tunnel, the something he etched being a triangle.

“The tunnel is a big triangle,” Louetta correctly surmised, and this was confirmed by the little troll’s big smile. “Thank you so much, Piszo,” she added, with Vini and Albert also chiming in their earnest thanks.

With Louetta again picking him up to ride on her shoulder for the trip back to the mansion, Piszo gave them one of his *whatever, no-big-deal* waves in reply.

Each side of Piszo’s triangle had been a different length, the shortest side being the tunnel from the mansion to the fallout shelter, the second shortest stretching from Mr. Galloway’s property to the farm, and the longest running from the stairs under the barn to the mansion’s root cellar. Albert had actually underestimated its length, which was right at three quarters of a mile.

Due to the fact that many renovations were made to the mansion over the years in secret, and were deliberately not recorded in any way so that they could remain as secret as possible, Dave and Violet would never know that the narrow stairs were built in the late forties, with the intention of also building a storm shelter, slightly deeper and therefore slightly safer than the basement. However, when the Doyle family decided to build the subbasement library, which could very well act as a storm shelter, the original plans were modified. Both the safe room and the tunnel were added in the late fifties and early sixties. Mr. Templeton and Mr. Doyle had worked together on the tunnel between the two estates because the residents of the mansion could definitely see the value of a fallout shelter, and Mr. Templeton could see the value in a safe room. Both families ended up hiding certain people in the safe room over the years for some very good reasons. During the time that Mr. Templeton and Mr. Doyle were working on their tunnel, Piszo’s parents had made the smaller tunnel that Piszo still regularly used to get to and from Mr. Galloway’s estate. The longer tunnel from the mansion to the farm was constructed in the late sixties and early seventies, for various reasons, but mainly as an additional escape route as needed in

case of a demon invasion of either the mansion or the farm, which was owned by the Hurd family, several members of which were colleagues of Gerard's father and traveled with him on many of his artifact-collecting expeditions. Then the additional tunnel from the barn to the fallout shelter was added later, as yet an additional escape route and safety option.

The trip back to the mansion took just under an hour. Climbing out of the root cellar and brushing off dust, the group made their way toward the back porch. Dave and Violet were gone on a trip to the bank and the grocery store. Assuming Albert, Louetta, and Vini were in the attic when they left to run errands, Violet had left a note in the kitchen for them. However, the tunnel explorers wouldn't end up seeing the note until later because Hul and Skugga were very nearby, behind the garden shed actually. While the demons had been hoping that the twins would be at the mansion, the pair wasn't all that disappointed not to find Ben and Sam because these other three kids would do just fine as victims. As far as how the goose chase had turned out, Boko had helped Hul and Skugga figure out that they had been tricked, which enabled the demons to resume their hunt for the twins.

Still slightly dusty from the tunnel, as they stepped up onto the back porch, Vini headed to the far railing to retrieve an old towel that Louetta had been using to dry her paint brushes so that they could further brush off before going into the house. Intent on toweling off, they didn't notice the demon pair advancing across the lawn until Pizzo gave a sharp squeal from his position on the porch table to alert them to the danger.

Nearing the porch, Hul and Skugga significantly slowed their stride. With three targets, they felt their best strategy would be to move slowly in order to see in which directions the human vermin might run.

Immediately after the squeal, thinking quickly, Pizzo turned to face Louetta's mural. After a series of squeaks, chirps, and odd gestures that perhaps resembled someone making a mud pie in the air, the area surrounding the table rapidly filled with bright multi-colored light swirls and flying sparks. The dazzling light show quickly built to such a whirling and sparking frenzy that it forced Albert, Vini, and Louetta to shield their eyes. Hul and Skugga too were blinded by the display and ended up halting.

As the lights softened slightly, Louetta, standing next to the table, found Pizzo tugging on her shirt and frantically pointing to her trompe l'oeil painting. As he gesticulated wildly, Louetta, unfortunately, had no idea what he might want her to do. Albert, on the other hand, was able to interpret and ended up giving his sister a hard shove toward the painting, into which she immediately tumbled, passing right through the wall as though it wasn't there and landing in the soft grass of the scenic countryside she had created. Vini leapt through next, followed by Albert who had managed to grab up Pizzo to take with him.

Still rubbing their light-stunned eyes, Hul and Skugga, at first, couldn't imagine where the teens and their little puck troll friend had vanished to, until they saw them inside the painting, which was now alive with the movements of the breeze rippling the pond's surface, and blowing grasses and wildflowers, while the horses grazed in the background.

While Pizzo's skills normally worked to bring artistic creations to life, this time, the magic of the little troll had somehow made a doorway into the painting, allowing them to escape into the place Louetta had created, which was actually full of life inside the mural. In gazing at their surroundings, Vini noticed that a couple of the horses had strolled nearer their position to look with wondering eyes at the odd creatures that had just arrived in the field.

Furious at being thwarted, the demons beat their fists against the painted wall. The beating availed them nothing as the brought-to-life painting was a place demons could not enter. Indeed, nothing connected to evil would be allowed there, inside Pizzo's magic, that is. Even if Satan himself had arrived on the scene, he wouldn't have been able to enter; nor would he have had any influence if he had somehow managed to find a way in because Pizzo's gift was directly from God, which made it untouchable by evil forces.

Breathing in the sweet country air, and feeling completely at peace, Vini suddenly remembered the saying, "When God closes a door, somewhere He opens a window."

But instead of the window proverbially meaning another opportunity, or in this case their escape route, the saying might have popped into her head because they were actually looking out of the kitchen window at the demons beating on what appeared from the

escapes perspective to be an invisible wall. Since the window was basically part of the scene, the mural being on either side of it, it was available for use inside the painting.

From this vantage point, what they saw next was rather shocking. However, Vini was slightly less shocked than Albert and Louetta because she recognized Zapor and Folto as they landed in the garden very near the back porch. *So Mrs. Ellis was right; they are still around*, she thought.

In what seemed to be less than three seconds, the gryphons leapt onto the porch, flinging the two demons out onto the lawns. Hul and Skugga tried to flee, but were swiftly pounced upon.

What happened next was almost painful to watch. As Zapor and Folto began ripping the yowling demons to shreds, Hul and Skugga didn't dissipate instantly as they might have from exposure to unicorn light. Instead, as pieces were torn from them—an arm, a foot, a wing, a leg—the torn pieces, after twitching around on their own for a bit, simply melted away, leaving only bits of greasy-looking sludge a few places in the yard that would wash away with the next rain.

After cleaning their beaks and talons on grass clumps and a couple of tree stumps, Zapor and Folto began preening their feathers as Louetta, Vini, Albert, and Pizzo climbed out of the painting.

While her friends were a little hesitant to approach, Vini had no qualms in walking straight up to the gryphons (though they were taller than she, even seated) as they were combing the undersides of their wings with their freshly-cleaned beaks.

“Thank you, so much!” Vini gushed, smiling, and delighted to meet Mrs. Doyle’s protectors.

“You are most certainly welcome,” Zapor calmly remarked, though his words were a tad muffled by a mouthful of feathers, as he was now combing his left shoulder.

Vini instantly realized she had heard his voice before, a deep voice, like a midnight rumble of thunder. It was he who had delivered the thought-message to her about not taking the thimble from Frances’ house in the fifties. However, at present, he was speaking actual aloud words to her. She also recognized his presence as what she had sensed both at Frances’ house and in the corn field just after the unicorn had killed the demon pack.

Folto spoke next, and her voice was a warm sound, like low alto singing in the morning sunshine on a mild summer day. “Our divine mission is to purge the world of evil filth; therefore, we need no thanks.”

“I would speak with you privately,” Zapor said in a low voice, drawing Vini a good distance away from the others, before saying, “Please, allow me to express my sincerest gratitude to you. I know it was you that saved my charge, Frances May Harrison, from the demons in nineteen hundred and fifty-five, on that fateful August day. I know because I saw you, in the field of late corn.”

Smiling, Vini acknowledged his words with a nod.

Having abilities somewhat similar to wind horses, though not as powerful, Zapor had caused the burst of wind in the field in an effort to scatter the demons. However, having been earlier distracted by a ploy by Boko, the gryphon had arrived at what would have been a split-second too late to save Frances. So Vini had truly saved his charge.

As far as Boko sending the demon pack to kill Frances, his idea had been to get rid of the problem in the past. If Frances died as a teen, she wouldn't become Mrs. Doyle, who collected the books that would help Vini learn how to call unicorns. Also, if the woman didn't exist, she wouldn't be able to hire Vini to clean her home. In short, if Mrs. Doyle didn't exist, the future would be much different, and Satan wouldn't lose the opportunity to gather so many souls. Indeed, based on being influenced by Mrs. Doyle, Vini was growing into quite a different person than she might have otherwise, this being a person making an impact on many lives, and not just when she happened to call unicorns.

Being a God-created creature like Satan, Boko could not directly harm any of God's children unless God allowed it. However, Satan and his fellow fallen angels had spawned many abominable creatures, such as demons and hobgoblins, these having their own free will, while being wholly corrupt, as opposed to good creatures turned to evil. And while nothing was ever outside of God's control, evil beings like Satan and Boko were able to exploit what they considered to be a small loophole in the rule. While not giving a direct order to harm or kill, using their powers of persuasion and even trickery on occasion, Satan and Boko could influence lesser creatures like demons to act on their behalf. Of course, God could easily destroy demons if He chose; but He often

allowed His helpers, such as Etowa, to take care of matters for Him. God also had many watchmen in place, to help with tasks such as protecting His children, especially His elect, those destined to do great things in keeping with His plan. With regards to saving Frances, Etowa had of course been on the ball. In addition to influencing Vini to time travel, he had also planted a seed letting Zapor know he had been distracted from his charge.

The gryphons didn't stay long because they needed to be off keeping watch over their current assignments, at a location some fifty miles away. Bidding the humans farewell, Zapor and Folto took to flight, with the late afternoon sun glinting off their golden fur and feathers. They disappeared so swiftly that they might have been likened to a couple of gold coins tossed high into the air to simply disappear within a single wink of the sun.

Entering the house and finding Violet's note, the group sat at the kitchen table to have glasses of water and further calm down from their latest demon ordeal.

Piszo was on the counter, gathering a mass of butter mints and cashews from their respective giant containers into a large napkin to take with him on a visit to Heike.

"Once again, saved by Piszo," Albert remarked. "Thanks little guy."

Giving one of his nonchalant waves, and hoisting the napkin onto his back like a large sack, the puck troll hopped down onto a stool, before sliding down one of the legs to race off to visit his friend.

Smiling, Vini decided that Piszo, with the sack of goodies being nearly as large as he was, looked much like Santa Claus about to deliver Christmas presents.

"The painting might be an even better place to hide in than the safe room," Louetta ventured, while retrieving a large bunch of grapes from the refrigerator for them to share.

"But if a tornado or something were to destroy the mansion," Albert countered, "the painting would also be destroyed, and likely us too, if we were inside at the time."

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that," Louetta said.

"So if the demons had taken axes to the painting, would they have been able to kill us?" Vini questioned.

“I would think so,” Albert answered. “We can ask Pizzo later, but I think he basically did what he had time to do for us. If we could have gotten to safety inside the house, with protection from crosses, or maybe Tulko driving them away, it might have been better.”

In consulting Pizzo later, they would come to find out that Albert was correct. However, since Hul and Skugga were rather dimwitted, they likely wouldn't have been able to work out destroying the mural as a means of destroying its inhabitants. Plus, if ever inside of a painting brought to life by a puck troll, any occupants could always exit, if something like a storm or another threat were to pose itself.

When Dave and Violet returned, in addition to describing their escape into the painting and the gryphons destroying the demons, Vini, Albert, and Louetta took turns excitedly relating the news about the triangle tunnel and the entrance found in the old root cellar. Though the couple would wait until the next day to explore the tunnel with Albert (while Louetta finished her trompe l'oeil painting), Dave did say that he planned to talk to Mr. Galloway about the fallout shelter, safe room, and getting the cave-in cleared. “I think it would be good to have a way to and from each other's estates, for use in cases of emergency. We could also do some investigating as to where exactly the farm with the barn is located, and find out who might own the property.”

Chapter Seventeen

The Box and the Bagical

On Thanksgiving Day, in reading a little more of Anei's journal, Vini came across another entry relating to the taking of the bible and her binder. "I still can't figure out why the boy took the bible and the notebook, especially the notebook because the thoughts of humans that they jot down aren't all that significant; only God's notes are really important to the world, and they are already well recorded, in many bibles all over the world. Maybe he meant to take the box the bible was in; that's far more important than what he actually took."

Connecting this with another note she had read a few days before, Vini looked it up to reread. "Being mainly focused on things inside, people often disregard and even discard wrappers, boxes, and other containers. But these outer coverings are often more important than what was once inside; some are even magical. Little children, in their innocence, before being hardened by the world, see the importance of these coverings, which is why they often like to play with wrapping paper and boxes more than whatever was inside."

Unless Sam took the binder and bible, then planted them in Ben's room, Ben probably took them, Vini reasoned. Being the thief didn't necessarily mean that Ben was the one possessed; but he might be. Still unsure as to which twin might be affected, she didn't feel ready to tackle that issue. However, she did feel the time was right to confront Ben about the issue of the theft. Knowing he would be working on Friday, which was also one of her scheduled work days, she would do so at the mansion. If he happened to be the one possessed, with other people around, she felt she would be relatively safe.

Arriving early, right at seven, she found Ben already pruning bushes and spreading mulch. While some distance from the house, he was in sight of the back porch where Violet and Louetta were breakfasting. Approaching Ben confidently, as he paused in shoveling mulch, she came straight to the point. "I ended up going into your room when

looking for the bathroom at your house, and I saw my spiral binder on your bookshelf.”

He didn’t deny taking it, which slightly surprised Vini. He was also remarkably calm when responding.

“I took both the zippered bible and the binder because God told me to take them, and I didn’t want to disobey Him. I fear Him much more than any human being, so I do my best to always listen carefully to His instructions and obey them. The command came to me both in a dream, and as a thought-message the next morning.” As Vini was looking at him with both surprise and interest, he went on. “Actually, He only told me to take the bible; He wanted it kept safe. And I thought He would tell you somehow that I took it and why. I took the binder too because I knew you put important notes in it; and it was with the bible, so it just seemed like a good idea at the time, to keep them both safe. But afterwards, I realized I probably should have just done what I was told.”

His words had a definite ring of truth to them that was, in fact, so strong, Vini had no reason to doubt that what he was saying was the truth.

However, in truth, Ben was slightly wrong. While neither he nor Vini would ever know it, the command to take the bible and keep it safe had not come from God, but was actually a move by Etowa who knew that Boko had planted a seed to persuade Kugari to steal the zippered bible. And though it would have been difficult for him to do so, because demons generally couldn’t touch a bible without hurting themselves, Kugari had thought ahead and had brought a special pair of gloves with him, along with a pack to stow the dreaded object in upon acquiring it.

Additionally, while the bible had provided an important key to Vini initially calling a unicorn, Anei was correct—because bibles were numerous, the box that had held the zippered one would have been of much more value to the demon.

Biking home at lunchtime, Ben brought both the bible and binder back to Vini who, in the evening, ended up stowing the bible in the trunk Violet had given her, which is where she had been keeping the box the bible had been found in. However, she didn’t place the bible into its box; instead, she removed the box from the trunk so that she could examine it.

A wooden box about the size of an ordinary shoe box, but a bit wider and flatter, her mind mused. Smooth wood, somewhat dark in color, maybe cherry or mahogany? Or just very old and maybe darkened like pine tends to darken.

Opening the box, and removing the small terrycloth towel the bible had been wrapped in, she examined the bottom inside of the box that looked very dark, almost black, and reminded her of the dried-up pitch in the bottom of the bucket on Harvey's Ghost.

Thinking of Anei's note about how wrappings and containers are often important, she also remembered him telling her she might find something she didn't know she was looking for.

It makes sense for the box to be important because Mrs. Doyle and her husband collected religious artifacts.

Mulling over everything as she was getting ready to go to sleep, Vini recalled a note in one of Mrs. Doyle's journals that she had read fairly recently, which made it easy to find early the next morning when she arrived at the mansion.

The entry described a journey to Turkey, which was where the wooden box had been procured, along with a few other items. With the mention of Turkey, for some reason, an image of the Rain Dragon suddenly popped into her brain. (This might have had something to do with a poppy seed sitting on the table near her). Thinking of the Rain Dragon then made her envision Noah's Ark. In wondering if the box might have been made of wood from the ark, and if this was the relic Anei had referred to, she suddenly had a good idea for a possible adventure later in the day.

After calling Tulko to have a brief conversation with him, Vini set to work cleaning.

Ben was working again today, because Sam was busy doing a landscaping project for one of the twins' neighbors. At around ten o'clock, Vini finished work for the day, and went to the garden to talk to Ben. "By any chance, would you be up for an adventure?"

"Sure," he answered, setting down the shovel he had been using and looking around the garden to note that he had come to a fairly good stopping point in his work.

"We'll be coming back, if you need to finish anything," Vini told him. "We might even be back by lunchtime. I was planning to do some

research in the afternoon. Plus, we'll want to say goodbye to Albert and Louetta, since they'll be leaving in the morning. I think they're packing right now."

Vini had the wooden box in her backpack, along with her dagger, and she was glad she had thought to bring both of them.

She had already arranged with Tulko for his sister Dara to accompany them, to carry Ben on the excursion. While Tulko would have been capable of carrying both of them, Vini was following the concept of safety in numbers. If Ben happened to be the one possessed, she felt sure Tulko and Dara could handle things; after all, they had battled demons before.

She was also planning to ask Pizzo to go along. Earlier, she had asked him to meet her by the shed just after ten. The reason she wanted him to meet her outside was to avoid having to answer possible questions from others by having a discussion with him inside the house.

With Dara and Tulko landing near the shed, Vini asked Pizzo, "By any chance, do you know where a grimmpt might be nearby?"

As Pizzo nodded, she said, "Oh good," before bending to pick him up so that he might ride on her shoulder when leading them to the grimmpt's location. While she had been taking a chance, Vini had felt sure that if one was in the area, the little troll would know it.

While Ben was slightly wary of horses (due to what happened at Plum Acres Ranch), he found riding Dara much easier than riding a regular horse because her aura basically held him in place; and he found he quite enjoyed the ride, particularly the flying part of it, since not many people would ever get to ride a wind horse.

Somehow communicating by thought, Pizzo directed the horses to a huge farm about fifteen miles outside of town, where they did indeed find a grimmpt, sniffing and snuffling in the dirt of a large garden plot, very near several hills of late squash and a couple of rows of sugar beets that had already gone to seed. With the terrain being somewhat hilly, the group was able to keep out of sight of the farmhouse.

Vini almost laughed to see the grimmpt because it basically looked like a little piggy, slightly smaller than an enrouse. In truth, grimmpts ranged in size from about as small as a cottontail rabbit to about as large as this one. This grimmpt was somewhat colorful, his

skin having a lovely lavender and turquoise sheen, and his hooves being a bright copper color with streaks of soft green.

“From what I’ve read about them,” Vini told Ben, as they were dismounting, “I thought grimmpts were like small dogs. I didn’t see a picture or drawing, but they are described as being like magical bloodhounds.”

Still sniffing the ground, while sideways eyeing the new arrivals, the grimmpt let Vini approach, where she bent to scratch behind his floppy ears. Quite enjoying the scratching, the grimmpt flopped down on his side in the soft earth so that she could also rub his belly, which he indicated he enjoyed by making happy grunting and snorting noises.

Next, unpacking the box from her backpack, Vini let the grimmpt sniff the box as he stood up. Making more grunting noises, along with a short squeal, the little piggy surprised everyone (except Pizzo) by taking to flight. Vini hadn’t even noticed the tiny wings, tucked closely and smoothly against the grimmpt’s body, until he raised them. Now, in motion, the little wings moved so fast that they reminded Vini of those of a hummingbird, whirring sound and all.

Quickly stuffing the box into her backpack, with Ben already again atop Dara, Vini remounted Tulko; and they were off.

In flight, the grimmpt’s colors began changing to blues and grays, resembling those seen more in the heavens; and Vini speculated that this was like the camouflage of wind horses who had the ability to look like sunset, dawn, cloud, horizon, and just about anything else associated with the skies.

Vini wasn’t able to tell how fast they might be traveling, though she did think it was much slower than the speed wind horses normally flew because she was able to distinguish large ground objects such as buildings and water towers fairly well, whereas, when riding Tulko, things on the ground generally appeared mostly as a blur.

Landing after about ten minutes of flight and dismounting, Ben and Vini were disappointed to discover that the magical piggy was merely taking a detour to visit another farm, in order to eat zucchini that his nose had drawn him to.

With Vini sighing in obvious impatience, Pizzo motioned to her to indicate that she simply must wait. He was quite good at miming when he needed to communicate with humans, and Vini well understood his

hold-your-horses gestures. As she sat down on a large flat rock to wait, Pizzo patted and petted her forearm (as if to further settle her) before sitting down beside her where he literally twiddled his thumbs while waiting patiently for the grimmpt to finish eating four zucchini, after which, the little piggy once again took to the skies.

Since she knew the grimmpt fed on human goodness, Vini felt it likely that he, like Pizzo, simply enjoyed eating people food; either that or it gave him extra fuel for flight.

In truth, the grimmpt did feel more like flying fast when full of his favorite foods; and his speed had obviously picked up because Vini was no longer able to distinguish anything below, or in the air either for that matter because everything simply looked like streaks and swirls in various hues of gray, pale blue, and white. She also noticed the sun's position changing very rapidly as they flew.

At right about twenty minutes from the zucchini stop, they set down again on a mountain amidst a grouping of boulders. Before even receiving a thought-message from Dara, Vini knew that they were in Turkey. It was early evening and chilly on the mountain, and though they were wearing jeans and long sleeves, both Ben and Vini wished they had thought to bring jackets. However, their shivering lasted for less than two minutes because, as one of his lesser-known magical powers, the grimmpt had the ability to give off heat, his skin color changing to amber and gold tones as he did so.

Warmed considerably, Ben and Vini moved out from behind a large boulder to overlook a huge valley stretched out below them in which they discovered what remained of Noah's Ark. They would have recognized it even without the thoughts laid onto their brains by Dara and Tulko. Though quite broken up, the ark still retained its overall shape, and was absolutely enormous, even larger than they might have imagined from seeing movies depicting the Great Flood. Since they hadn't noticed it when landing, Vini wondered if it might be magically camouflaged in some way, to make it obscured from the air. Whether disguised from an air view or not, they had no trouble seeing the ark from their vantage point on the mountain, gazing out over the valley; and while Vini had anticipated the find, the absolutely breathtaking sight ended up leaving her as speechless as Ben. Even Pizzo, from his spot on Vini's shoulder, was astounded.

After probably about three or four awe-filled minutes, as the horses waited patiently and the grimmpt began snuffling amongst grass clumps, able to find her voice first, Vini said, "I imagine the weather conditions and the pitch have helped keep the ark fairly well preserved."

Looking for the best route, they were on the point of scrambling down the mountain slope to explore the ship when Zapor suddenly swooped in to land directly in front of them, basically blocking their path.

"Clever you are, to discover the Great Ark," he said. "However, you must not say anything. I keep this secret; you must now do likewise."

Although slightly intimidated by the gryphon, especially his stern tone, Ben couldn't help protesting. "But this is just the sort of thing that could make people believe in the bible. It's the evidence the world needs to turn more people to God."

Shaking his head, Zapor responded even more sternly. "The time has not yet come for the world to learn of this secret. You must trust and wait. Do not tell anyone, not a single soul."

Though she didn't say anything, because she recognized the truth in his words, Vini, too, wanted to protest. Knowing this, Zapor told her. "You must listen most closely. I carry a direct message from the Lord on High, from your Heavenly Father. You must keep this secret; do not even tell it to those closest to you. You must trust Him. His ways and thinking are much higher than yours. What your eyes have seen here, you must not speak of."

Nodding, Vini answered, "Agreed."

Giving Pizzo something of a warning glare, Zapor added, "Puck trolls must also keep many secrets, such as this very important one."

Being rarely intimidated by large magical creatures, Pizzo wasn't particularly afraid of Zapor; however, somehow knowing that he needed to obey in this case, he gave the gryphon a solemn nod of agreement.

Reluctantly turning as Zapor departed, Ben and Vini remounted Dara and Tulko. The grimmpt, having shortly before caught a whiff of sweet potatoes some five hundred miles away, had already gone in search of them, which was not in any way a problem because the wind horses could easily find their way back.

Returning to the mansion took merely twenty minutes of flight during which Ben and Vini were somewhat subdued. Though the grimmpt had basically led them to one of the greatest finds of all time, they wouldn't be able to tell or show anyone else, which was slightly disappointing. But while Vini might have felt downcast, she also knew to closely heed the instructions of Zapor. In addition to gryphons being wise creatures, the command had come from God; and He always knows best, no matter what human beings might think in their brains. Ben, having had a lot of fun just riding Dara and seeing the ark, managed to get over feeling let down pretty quickly. As he set about finishing a couple of things in the garden, after saying a quick prayer of thanks to God for the experience, he whistled as he worked.

Piszo, on the other hand, experienced no feelings of disappointed; and he too whistled, making his way to his den to begin sketching. Having read about the Great Flood in the bible, and now having seen the actual boat, he set about drawing a picture of the animals boarding in pairs. On top of the ark, he drew two gryphons who would be coming along for the ride in order to watch over and possibly advise those sheltered inside.

Sitting on the back porch with Ben a short while later, Vini remarked, "I haven't seen the firebirds lately."

"Jelzey's around," he responded. "There she is." Across the lawn, Ben's protector was as small as a bee, but grew just a bit, to more the size of a walnut, so that Vini could see her.

"But come to think of it," Ben added, "I haven't seen Beme much lately. Maybe he's caught Sam's melancholy; you know he's been down in the dumps for a few weeks."

More like since the spring, Vini thought.

Vini and Ben had a late lunch with Louetta and Albert, after which, Ben left for home while Vini helped Louetta finish packing up some of her art supplies. In addition to smocks, pallets, and brushes, this included around five hundred tubes of paint. Placing what seemed to be about twenty-five shades of green into a canvas tote, Vini remarked, "If a color wheel only has six colors on it, how can they possibly come up with so many different shades of each? It's amazing."

"By creativity and customizing," Louetta answered. "That's the simple answer anyway."

On the subject of colors, Vini suddenly pictured a rainbow and thought of the doves and dragons corresponding to the colors. Except for having seven colors, instead of six, a rainbow might be considered something like a color wheel, though in the shape of a bow. In considering the heavenly connection and the fact that seven was a significant biblical number, she then imagined the rainbow to be something of an advanced color wheel, from which angels might paint heavenly masterpieces for God. And this led her to recall something she had scribbled down in her journal recently, relating to both the numbers five and seven. “If the fifth element is quintessence (quint meaning five), is there such a thing as septessence (sept meaning seven), possibly corresponding to the colors of the rainbow? If related to colors, art, doves, peacocks, and dragons, the concept might be as mysterious as quintessence.”

With this thought, the idea of color being completely magical began to grow in her mind, which made a lot of sense because there were plenty of studies on the power behind certain colors, as far as how they can make people feel. For instance, while bedrooms were often painted calming shades of blue, dining rooms were sometimes painted in reds, which were supposed to stimulate the appetite. Wearing specific colors could also make people feel certain ways, and employment experts even offered advice as to which colors were best to wear for interviews. Keeping all of this in mind, while connecting it to the wonder of a rainbow, it wasn't too much of a stretch to think of colors themselves holding magical powers, and to give this concept the name of septessence. Perhaps a certain magical color could instantly cause people to fall asleep, while another might come alive to defend a person from being attacked.

Vini was brought out of her fanciful ponderings when Charlie arrived at the mansion with Boomer. Nobody had seen much of Charlie lately, primarily because she had been busy catering two Thanksgiving parties. It was also the height of volleyball season, so she had been busy with practice, even during their week off from school. But she had made time for a brief visit today so that she could see Albert and Louetta. She brought some leftover Thanksgiving desserts with her, which Pizzo certainly enjoyed in between several bouts of throwing a tennis ball for Boomer to fetch.

While Charlie was excited to hear about the triangle tunnel, she wouldn't have time to explore it today (even though Albert was anxious to show it to her and urged her to stay) because she had to hurry home to drop off Boomer before heading to volleyball practice. In fact, she only stayed about twenty minutes in total to have a glass of sweet tea and admire Louetta's mural, while hearing about the harrowing demon encounter, after which, she hugged each of her friends before collecting Boomer and making a dash for the car.

Since Charlie hadn't wanted to see the tunnel, Albert lost his interest in exploring it again and, after saying goodbye to Vini, shortly went to his room to read at around the same time Pizzo returned to his den to continue drawing.

Hugging Louetta goodbye and retrieving her backpack from the butler's pantry, Vini left a little while later.

That night, Charlie actually woke herself up giggling in her sleep from having a funny dream. She had been dreaming about a vision she had earlier in the day in her bedroom mirror, of Vini, sometime in the future, winning a Nobel Peace Prize for proving the existence of unicorns and dragons. Vini was in the process of donating both her medal and the prize money to charity when Charlie had another vision inside of her dream in which she was winning the prize herself, for no other reason than cooking food that angels adore. Waking and still giggling a bit, she was wise enough to know that the food prize was merely a fantasy. On the other hand, she couldn't rule out Vini's win; it seemed a lot more plausible since both dragons and unicorns could very well bring peace to the world.

On Sunday afternoon, reading and taking notes in her room, Vini found herself again pondering the concept of septessence, as being another heavenly element like quintessence, but connected to art in some way, and specifically to colors. Thinking of Pizzo having such magical command over art reinforced the idea, along with a brief note in Anei's journal mentioning both mirrors and ropes made of color being used as weapons.

She was brought out of her magical ponderings upon spying a speck of something on the floor by her desk, which turned out to be a seed from a bell pepper, which she placed into her trash can. Seldom eating anything in her room and never a bell pepper, she could only wonder at

how it got there. Probably, she assumed, from some time when she was helping her mom cook and they were cutting up peppers, which was likely some time ago since she couldn't remember the family eating bell peppers anytime recently.

Back to jotting down notes about the possibility of septessence, she wondered if she should even spend time on the subject, since she had never read anything about it in her research. However, her mind suddenly told her, *Don't just rely on research, but your own reasoning as well, because, in doing so, you might well discover something no one else has.* With this thought, her mind again filled with ideas about the power of colors, especially magical colors, which made absolute sense when connected to the peacock, one of the most colorful of all birds and obviously completely magical. And with the bird having a lot of indigo coloring, and likely being involved in the making of the burnished doves, she wondered if the indigo dove might indeed (as "The Wondrous Seven" fable claimed) be the most powerful of all of the doves. Then, by extension, the indigo dragon might be as well. "Colors are even healing," she suddenly wrote in her journal, without particularly thinking as she did so. In fact, she had already written the whole sentence before her mind registered the thought.

After only a short pause, she again found herself writing a thought before it even registered in her brain. "The healing related to dragons is both literal and symbolic, literal because dragons have the power to medically heal, and symbolic because they will ultimately heal the world by sweeping it of evil by burning it away."

Wondering at this new skill she seemed to have just developed—writing her thoughts before actually having them—she wondered at what it might be called. Automatic writing came to mind. While Vini had heard of this before, she had always associated it with something evil and never good. But she didn't see why God couldn't give a person this skill to use for good, instead of evil. In fact, she thought this could very well be a way God might choose to send messages to people.

She wrote one final thing without particularly thinking. "The rainbow is not only a symbol of a promise, but a symbol of septessence." However, while thinking after writing this statement, Vini remembered and wrote down something Frances had told her that could well apply to reasoning things out for herself and not relying so

much on the research of others. “I need to use my brain more, and to use *more* of my brain.”

Cleaning out and reorganizing her closet a short while later, she noticed the bag the dulcimer had come in sitting on top of a shoe box. While she had given the dulcimer to a musical friend at church, Gwen Corbitt, Vini had kept the bag. Remembering Anei’s note about wrappers often being incredibly important, she suddenly felt very glad she had done so. The bag had sat folded on the top of her trunk for several weeks, but she had moved it when stowing the zippered bible in the trunk and retrieving the wooden box. As she picked up the plum-colored velvet bag, a very strange feeling crept over her, and the term, *bagical*, suddenly sprang to mind. *Could it be?*

Scrambling for her backpack, she pulled out a book in which she had marked a chapter containing information on magical objects, including bagicals, but which she hadn’t yet had time to read. In flipping the book open, a specific paragraph jumped out at her. “While a bagical will most often look like an ordinary cloth bag, generally made of silk or velvet, objects that have been in a bagical and have turned magical in some way will bear a specific symbol.” The symbol displayed on the page reminded Vini of an infinity symbol, like an elongated sideways cursive 8, but with an extra loop, totaling three in all.

Vini was almost unable to breathe upon realizing she had seen this symbol on the dulcimer, a small mark on one side, which she had assumed to be a signature mark of the person who had made the instrument. *So Gwen has a magical dulcimer*, Vini thought. *I wonder what it might do, and if she’ll figure it out.* Upon pondering that she had kept the instrument in her possession for a while, with nothing bad happening, Vini reasoned that the dulcimer probably wasn’t dangerous or bad in any way, so she didn’t think she needed to warn Gwen.

Carefully placing the bag into her trunk for safekeeping, Vini all of a sudden thought that she might have seen the symbol once before, but she couldn’t quite picture where. With her mind reaching, it finally came to her ten minutes later when she was brushing her teeth. Hurrying to rinse her mouth, she rushed back to her room to root through an old cigar box that she kept in her sock and underwear drawer. Pushing aside ribbons, hair ties, and the buttons she had

collected during her trip to the fifties, she retrieved the rose-colored glasses from the box. Sure enough, the small sideways three-loop symbol was on one of the earpieces of the glasses. *So these have been in a bagical.* Having tried them on at the fair with nothing happening, Vini never imagined they might be magical. And having another pair of sunglasses, she had simply been keeping these as a spare. In remembering Professor Fulhausen describing glasses that enabled the wearer to see one minute ahead, Vini put the rose-colored glasses on, almost expecting that she might be able to see into the future. Other than tinting everything in her room a slight rose color, the glasses performed no tricks; and she felt somewhat silly to have thought they might do exactly what another pair of magical glasses might do, especially since bagicals were likely complex and highly-creative magical objects, unlikely to repeat themselves when making their creations, unless they wanted to, for some reason.

Vini decided to carry the glasses in her backpack for a while, since she most often had the pack with her these days, when toting books, water-polo gear, and other whatnots. *If I have them with me, she thought, I can put them on once in a while to see what they might do.*

The answer as to what the glasses might do came very unexpectedly, while Vini was having at a sleepover at Charlie's house on Friday night. Lyydu happened to be in the back yard, but was currently invisible since Charlie's father was in the house. As the girls were in the kitchen making popcorn to have while watching a movie, Vini chanced to put on the glasses, which she had been carrying in her pocket during the day to easily access them every so often in order to test them. Gazing out the window with the glasses on, she found she could suddenly see Lyydu. Slipping the glasses down her nose to peer over the lenses, she could tell he was still invisible. The invisible Lyydu was revealed again as she quickly pushed the glasses up to once more peer through the lenses.

Charlie had been aware of Vini's experimenting, though she had been skeptical that the glasses her friend had gotten at the Renaissance Fair would actually prove magical.

"Well I'll be," Charlie said, taking a turn looking through them at Lyydu. "That's pretty amazing."

The glasses were indeed amazing. However, while Vini had no problem sharing the function of the glasses with her friend, she decided to keep the bagical a secret. Though she knew Charlie was trustworthy, she wanted to be very cautious. Each blessing God had bestowed upon her, such as wind horses and the ability to summon unicorns, had come with a lot of responsibility to exercise caution, and prove that He could trust her. Some people might well abuse having a wind horse, in being tempted to rob a bank or get back at someone who had wronged them. But Vini had never felt tempted to do something like this. God had even allowed her to travel into the past because He knew she wouldn't abuse the privilege. With a powerful magical object such as the bagical, she felt the need to be doubly cautious, so as not to tempt another person to misuse it. What if Charlie wanted to put something into the bag, like a cooking utensil? Then, what if that utensil ruined her life, or someone else's, or gave her an unfair advantage over others? It simply wasn't worth the risk. Instead of telling anyone, Vini decided she would heed Professor Fulhausen's advice and put the bag away, not using it, while trying not to even think of it. After all, God might have actually given it to her simply to keep it safe, and possibly just to keep it out of the hands of others who might misuse it.

Vini had to admit she was worried about having the bagical; however, she firmly believed that God wouldn't have given it to her if He didn't think she could handle the responsibility. She briefly pondered that the bag might have actually come her way by means of Satan, though God would know about it, of course, since He knows everything. But even if this were so, and if it was a test of some sort, Vini would prove trustworthy, and pass the test. *We are never tempted beyond our means to resist*, she reminded herself.

While she didn't intend to use the bagical, she definitely would use the rose-colored glasses. For one thing, she wanted to know if they didn't just reveal creatures that might be invisible, but those disguised as well. This was confirmed on Saturday morning at the mansion. While wearing the glasses and gazing out of the attic windows into Mr. Galloway's yard, she happened to see the enormouse near the gazebo. Slipping the glasses down to look over the lenses, she then couldn't see him, but could again a moment later when pushing them back up the bridge of her nose. Smiling, Vini was pleased that the glasses had

enabled her to see through the creature's camouflage. *These might come in very handy*, she thought, pocketing the glasses.

The garden shed had felt strange to her the last time she had gone in to fetch a pair of gloves, and Vini decided to see if anything invisible or camouflaged might be hiding out there. She was almost afraid the hobgoblin might have returned. Keeping this in mind, she took a pitchfork in with her that had been leaning against the side of the shed. The rose-colored glasses firmly in place, she propped the door open with a brick while firmly grasping the pitchfork with both hands before cautiously stepping inside. Right away, because he was actually sitting in the wheelbarrow not four feet in front of her, Vini spied what she assumed was a gremlin, the assumption coming from reading speculations as to what the invisible (and destructive) monsters might look like.

The supposition was correct, as the creature eyeing her warily was indeed a gremlin. Mainly a dark gold color but with greenish hues dotting his lizard-like skin, he was about twice the size of a basketball, and sported pointy ears and reddish-brown eyes, the ears and eyes very much seeming to Vini to be too large for his head, which comprised nearly half of his total body. A small pot belly and sinewy arms and legs with clawed fingers and toes rounded out his frame.

Staring intently at Vini—and almost sure she could see him, though he didn't quite know how because gremlins were invisible to humans, as well most other creatures—the gremlin remained absolutely still, as though being motionless might help to hide him.

While Vini's first instinct was to use the pitchfork to route the gremlin out of the shed and drive him away, she suddenly heard a small voice in the back of her mind telling her to back off and leave him alone.

Heeding the voice, because, though small, it was very clear (like a bell), she quickly backed out of the shed, moving the brick and closing the door. Leaving the pitchfork propped against the shed, she swiftly returned to the house.

Almost sure that the voice was God giving her instruction, she was very glad she had obeyed. She had started hearing His voice more clearly lately. While God's voice could, of course, be very loud, Vini knew from reading First Kings that He had once used a "still small

voice” when speaking to Elijah. So she reasoned He might well speak to her in this way too.

Smiling, Vini next remembered something Mrs. Doyle had once said—that she should have known the creature living in the shed (the one that attacked Louetta) was a hobgoblin and not a gremlin because, if it had been a gremlin, the lawn mower probably would have been broken. From her research, Vini had discovered that this was what gremlins most liked to do—break mechanical things. However, while she knew that the gremlin might well break something in the shed, she would still definitely leave the creature alone, for now at least.

At home in the evening, Vini put the bagical inside of a brown paper bag and placed it in the bottom of her trunk, at the very back. As she did so, she placed a firm thought in the very back of her mind. *Just forget about it.*

And so she did, for the time being, anyway.

However, just to be clear, the bagical in Vini’s closet was not the one Pizzo had been thinking of putting his socks into. Though a rare magical object, there were actually two in the neighborhood, the other being at Mrs. Ellis’ house. She currently had a set of candlesticks wrapped in the silk bag that was slightly smaller than Vini’s bagical, and sky blue in color, although it was somewhat faded for as old as it was, Mrs. Ellis having acquired it when she was fairly young. The bag had been found with the unicorn whistle she had mentioned to Vini, the one she and Frances hadn’t been able to get to work. Mrs. Ellis had been correct in her assumption that some magical objects require training to use them. In addition to training, discipline and natural talent were often key factors, as were having pure hearts and minds.

Chapter Eighteen

A Thimbleful of Tears

At work on Thursday afternoon, Vini discovered that the first foster kid had arrived at the mansion earlier in the week; however, fifteen-year-old Megan Bahn was only staying a few days while her regular foster family's home was being repaired from damage it had sustained during a wind storm. Megan evidently preferred camping out in her room, mostly reading and playing the guitar, but Vini did manage to see her to say hello. During their brief conversation, Megan told Vini that she wouldn't be staying long and that she was anxious to get back to her regular foster family who were evidently in the process of adopting her. Sam was working on this day. Megan actually went to his school, but he didn't know her very well. When she saw him briefly, she made sure to tell him she wouldn't be staying.

Since Megan seemed to want mostly to be left alone, Vini tried not to disturb her. And she could understand her not particularly wanting to get to know Violet or Dave, or anyone else, since she was only at the mansion for a short time. Other than feeding her and doing her laundry, Violet had mainly just been driving Megan to and from school because, being in a different school district, she couldn't get the bus.

Violet had asked Pizzo to keep out of sight for a bit, particularly since Megan wasn't staying. This was fine with him because he didn't mind spending more time with Heike. In recent weeks, they had pretty much taken over the Galloways' attic, playing Chinese checkers and backgammon, and working on two enormous jigsaw puzzles. Whether or not Mr. and Mrs. Galloway knew they had a puck troll, and one with a friend that visited regularly, they never disturbed the games and puzzles lying around in the attic. Pizzo felt they probably did know, but likely didn't care. Puck trolls seemed to have a knack for taking up residence in just the right homes, ones where the people were either pleased or at least extremely tolerant of having them around.

Thankfully, Megan had already left by Saturday because Vini was about to find out exactly which of the twins was possessed. Arriving at work early, she found Violet and Dave gone for the day, off to a big building supply center to order a truckload of materials for beginning construction on the greenhouse. Sam and Ben were both already at the mansion, doing a variety of gardening chores and finishing getting the site for the greenhouse leveled and ready for construction. The firebirds were in the garden as well, but only briefly because they both suddenly felt the urge to head off to visit Yellowstone National Park, to admire some of the geysers, bubbling mud pots, and other thermal features.

Charlie was also at the mansion, not cooking for Violet this time, but borrowing the double ovens to make a few things ahead of time for an upcoming event she was catering. Dave and Violet had several times offered Charlie use of their roomy kitchen for help with her work, but this was the first time she had decided to take them up on the offer. In trade, as a surprise, she was planning to make them a cake and a chicken casserole.

Piszo was not around. He and Heike were on the verge of finishing one of the jigsaw puzzles. Plus, Mr. Galloway was grilling, which meant an opportunity to sneak a couple of chicken legs and some of Mrs. Galloway's yummy homemade potato salad for both himself and Heike. (Piszo was a master at sneaking food away from parties and barbecues, often right under people's very noses.)

After greeting Charlie in the kitchen, Vini set about cleaning the third-floor bedroom and bathroom that Megan had been using. She hadn't been at the task long when she heard something of a ruckus in the back yard, in the form of crashing about and yelling. Charlie heard it too, of course, being much closer to the back yard than the bedroom Vini was currently in, which was at the front of the house.

Being busy with cooking, Charlie, at first, ignored the ruckus, which was taking place just outside the door of the garden shed. Vini also decided not to bother with what might be happening in the back yard; until, that is, she heard one of the twins scream loudly for help. Almost sure it was Ben she was hearing, Vini raced downstairs. Suddenly thinking that the boys had likely tangled with the gremlin, she was kicking herself for not warning everyone about the creature.

Charlie was already running across the back lawns toward the garden shed by the time Vini made it out the back door. Also racing across the yard, Vini almost ran into the back of Charlie who, in viewing the scene in front of her, had abruptly skidded to a stop. Vini, in taking in the sight, also stood stock-still in shock.

Both girls were too late to save Ben from Sam, who had just killed his brother and was currently on his knees bending over the lifeless body.

A short while earlier, Sam, being the one possessed, had tried to use the chainsaw to kill his twin. Finding it broken, he then attacked with a pair of hedge shears. As they struggled, Ben was cut on his arm by the shears, before he managed to wrench them from his brother's hands. Warding off a pick axe and a shovel next, Ben continued to fight back until Sam finally managed to knock him down before leaping on him and stabbing him in the chest several times with a screwdriver.

Rising from the side of his dead brother, with the screwdriver still in his hand, the expression on Sam's face was ghastly, and very odd, because he looked both horrified and satisfied at the same time, as though he might be rapidly flitting back and forth between the two emotional states. This was indeed the case, as the small part of him that was still conscious was horrified, while the larger part that the demon was controlling was very satisfied, even elated, at having committed the murder.

While Vini had arrived too late to save Ben, she hoped to be able to save Sam from the demon inside him, which she was sure would eventually kill him too. Coming to her senses, she swiftly called a unicorn, while quickly telling Charlie, "Look away."

As the shimmering creature appeared, Vini and Charlie did look away; and not a moment too soon as the unicorn lit up, majestically, illuminating the entire garden with its intense golden light.

The light quickly exorcised the demon because, in the same way that evil spirits couldn't hide from God, they also couldn't hide from godly light. Even being inside of a human being didn't shield the demon, especially not this close in proximity to the unicorn.

The moment the light touched Sam, who thankfully had his eyes closed, the demon, in a vain effort to escape from the sudden pain, streamed swiftly out of his mouth and nose. There was, of course, no

escape from the unicorn's light and the demon instantly vaporized, leaving only minute bits of grimy sludge on the grass by the shed door, mixed with Ben's blood. Even if the nasty creature had remained inside Sam, the demon would have died, and Sam's body would have eventually expelled and excreted the small corporeal bits of the nastiness in various ways, leaving him relatively physically unharmed.

Having fought the demon inside him for many months, and being both mentally and physically exhausted from the struggle, Sam had very little strength left. Dropping the screwdriver and falling to his knees, he wept over his brother.

As soon as the light subsided and it was safe to look again, Charlie quickly moved to Ben's side, to see if there was anything she could do. Vini, on the other hand, was in something of a state of panic. While she had managed to call a unicorn, she couldn't think what to do next. Blessedly, the answer came to her almost immediately, from the unicorn, which was one Vini had never seen before and had eyes that resembled Ben's. Gazing into the creature's soft brown eyes, she received a thought-message that sounded like words mixed with softly-flowing water. *Find Zapor.*

Two seconds later, the unicorn simply vanished.

Vini didn't have any idea how she might find Zapor, and her brain was still panicking. However, suddenly thinking of Tulko, she silently called for him, while praying he was within the reach of her thoughts.

The wind horse arrived less than eight seconds later. "We need to find the gryphon, Zapor," she told him.

Receiving a nod from Tulko, Vini very quickly hopped aboard. While she had no idea as to how Zapor might be able to help, she intended to follow the command of the unicorn. Since she hadn't done much research on gryphons, she thought it possible they could somehow raise the dead, maybe as one of their lesser-known skills. In a hurriedly-devised plan, it was decided that Charlie would stay with Ben and Sam while Vini and Tulko went for Zapor.

As the pair leapt away, Charlie wept with Sam. In addition to the emotional shock, she felt very confused, and full of regret. Since this was exactly what she had seen in her vision, she now realized she should have taken steps to warn Ben. She also felt that she should not have been so preoccupied in the kitchen as to delay in running out to

help. If she had reacted more quickly, she might have been able to prevent this tragedy. Now, all she could do was pray, which she did.

Less than fifteen seconds after leaving the mansion, Vini and Tulko were circling a large manor house in the country. Zapor happened to be on the roof and swiftly rose into the air to meet them.

Through her tears, Vini frantically tried to get across to him that one of her friends was dead, killed by another friend, his brother, and that a unicorn had told her to find him. While he might have had difficulty deciphering her almost-incoherent ramblings, Zapor was also receiving instructions in his brain from another source.

Interrupting Vini, the gryphon calmly told Tulko, "Follow me, youngling wind horse." To Vini he said, "A sky serpent is needed to heal your friend."

While she was thinking, *But he's already dead, not just injured*, Vini didn't argue, but simply gave a small nod. Since a unicorn had told her to find Zapor, she would simply have to trust.

Also trusting in God, Vini said a prayer as they dashed away. *Dear Lord, please help me. Help me hear Your voice clearly, and help me obey. And please help Ben.*

Gryphons were evidently very fast, possibly nearly as fast as a wind horse. At least, from Vini's perspective, this seemed likely, as Tulko was basically following a golden streak in the sky, with the sky itself being streaked with the blues, purples, grays, and whites that were familiar to her from her jaunts with Tulko.

Her brain working slightly better as they flew, Vini considered Zapor's last statement, about finding a dragon to heal Ben.

Well, I have been looking for a dragon, she thought, *but I could have wished for better circumstances in which to find one.*

After only about three minutes of flight, they set down in a deserted rocky area that was also somewhat hilly. Dismounting, Vini could hear the ocean somewhere nearby and could faintly smell salty sea water.

Following Zapor a short distance as he trudged over the swell of a hill, they shortly descended into a boulder-filled valley to enter a cave, the entrance of which was just large enough for Zapor to squeeze inside. Vini followed closely. Since she couldn't imagine how a dragon might have squeezed into the cave, she thought it likely there was another

entrance. While Tulko peeked inside the cave, he decided to stay outside to wait for them.

Vini was able to see well enough in the very low light of the interior of the cave; but this was mainly because Zapor seemed to be glowing a bit, as his feathers and fur caught glances of light from the entrance and two small natural ceiling holes. The cave basically formed one large room, about the size of a small two-story house, and didn't appear to have any tunnels leading off from it.

While she didn't see a dragon, Vini did very quickly catch sight of two small doves, perched on a rock ledge about eye level in the rear of the cave. She had spotted them mainly because their metallic-looking feathers were catching glints of light similar to the way Zapor was currently illuminated. One of the doves was bright crimson in color, while the other looked like shiny tree moss. Both had their heads tucked under their wings and were sleeping.

Having calmed somewhat, and thinking more clearly, Vini's brain told her, *If these are two of the burnished doves, they are the red and green colors of the rainbow.*

The moss-colored one had waked and had taken a couple of steps toward her on the ledge.

"Take the dove in your hands," Zapor advised. "Hurry now."

As she did so, and as the dove cooed softly, Vini was surprised at how warm the bird was.

Following Zapor outside and hopping onto Tulko, they were swiftly away, with Vini carefully holding the dove close to her with both hands, since she never needed hands to ride Tulko.

Having previously decided that she would need to find the burnished doves, in order to then find dragons, Vini assumed this dove was going to lead them to a dragon. And she was very surprised when they landed in the garden of the mansion, at right about four minutes after leaving the cave.

Slipping from Tulko's back and gently placing the dove on the ground, she thought, *The dove must be going to call a dragon, not lead us to one.*

Still kneeling beside his brother, Sam was still crying, while Charlie was using a towel to put pressure on Ben's wounds. Though she knew he was dead, she couldn't think of what else to do. And in hoping and

trusting that miraculous magical help was on the way, she was not quite ready to call the police to tell them that one of her friends had killed another.

Beme and Jelzey were back from their excursion. Both had been distracted by a ploy by Boko, in the form of a tomato seed that had planted the longing in both of them to visit Yellowstone. However, sensing what had happened, even from that great a distance, mainly the distress of Sam, the firebirds had arrived back just after Vini left.

Boko's Yellowstone move, while Etowa was aware of it, was actually something he had chosen not to counter because, even if Beme had become aware of the demon inside of Sam, the firebird wouldn't have been able to kill the demon without killing Sam too. And Jelzey might have panicked in trying to save Ben, and then might have killed Sam. With firebirds being so incredibly powerful, Etowa's worry over the well-meaning protectors possibly harming either or both of the twins was legitimate. Plus, he thought Boko's move might work to his advantage which, in this case, would actually prove true.

Beme and Jelzey were currently both the size of small falcons and were hovering very near their charges. With Zapor cautioning them to stay back, they retreated to a position near the rear of the shed where they shrunk slightly in size upon realizing that they were adding a great deal of warmth to the area.

Her attention fixed on the dove, Vini was slightly surprised when the bird walked slightly away from the group in the direction of the fountain. She had little time to wonder at this action because the dove surprised everyone (except Zapor) by suddenly changing, growing and shapeshifting very rapidly into the form of a dragon.

The whole transformation taking less than fifteen seconds, the creature stopped growing at the point when he was slightly larger than a school bus.

Being so startled by the dove transforming into the dragon, Vini barely noticed when a large peacock landed on the roof of the shed. Being the one who helped create the burnished doves (that were also sky serpents), the peacock kept track of what he considered to be his children, often observing their actions and advising them.

Vini was startled out of being startled when Zapor spoke to her. “You will need the thimble, the specific one that I spoke to you about once before.”

She had it in her pocket, along with her keys, and was very thankful that she had still been carrying it with her everywhere she went.

“Use it to measure the tears of the dragon,” Zapor instructed. “Dragon tears are a healing potion. The tears of the burnished dove won’t work because the dove has to be in dragon form to produce healing tears.”

The moss-green dragon had indeed begun to cry, shedding tiny tears that resembled a thick metallic liquid, mainly silvery in color, but with swirling and ever-changing streaks of rainbow colors mixed in.

“The measure has to be precise,” Zapor warned. “A drop too much will be fatal; a drop too little and the potion won’t be effective. That is why this specific thimble is needed, because it is exactly the right size for the draught needed to heal him.”

Trusting, Vini didn’t bother asking how a potion could be fatal to someone already dead. Not only did she not want to waste time, she also knew she couldn’t rely on her brain to work things out because divine and magical things often worked themselves out in completely unexpected ways.

As the dragon bent its head forward, she carefully caught the tiny tears slipping down its cheek into the thimble, to the point that it was exactly full.

“He will need to drink it,” Zapor told her.

Gingerly carrying the draught to Ben, with Charlie and Sam moving back, Vini slowly knelt to extremely carefully tip the thimble into Ben’s mouth. As the thick liquid slipped down his throat and into his stomach, it lit up inside him, reminding Vini of a subdued version of unicorn light, which spread very quickly throughout Ben’s entire body, briefly making him look something like a human lamp before the glowing light faded about thirty seconds later, at which point, Ben sat up, gasping slightly with the effort of his first few breaths of coming back to life.

The dragon had begun shrinking and shifting, so quickly that he was back in dove form in around ten seconds, at which point, both the dove

and the peacock took off. Less than a minute later, they were merely distant glittering specks in the azure sky.

With Charlie helping him to his feet, Ben seemed fine.

Sam, pulling up his brother's t-shirt, could find no damage from the screwdriver. Though blood still streaked Ben's chest, there were no marks from the stabs, not even a scar; and the cut on his arm from the hedge shears was completely healed. While he still had various small scars on his body from previous injuries, none remained from Sam's attack.

Vini's brain, marveling, could hardly take it all in. Nothing from her research had indicated that dragons might have the power to raise the dead. But, of course, their healing abilities hadn't been very well described in any books or in Mrs. Doyle's journals. Everything relating to this was vague and speculative.

But it wasn't just the healing that was astonishing. She could never have imagined that the doves were the dragons, and could only wonder at how many times she might have seen dragons in her lifetime—up in a tree, sitting on the rim of a fountain, in a garden furrow, or wherever.

"We should clean up the blood," Vini suddenly realized, "so that Dave and Violet won't freak out when they get back." With this, she hurried to the butler's pantry to retrieve some old towels from a cabinet.

"You should change clothes," Charlie advised Ben and Sam, who were both basically covered in blood.

The twins had each been keeping a spare pair of jeans and a t-shirt in the shed, in case they ever need to change when at the mansion.

Sam, weak and emotionally raw, was actually in worse shape than Ben, who led his brother into the shed to help him peel off his t-shirt and jeans (also helping him wipe off with several clean garden rags) before donning the clean clothes. After doing the same for himself, Ben led Sam, whose legs were shaking, up to the back porch to sit and recover somewhat.

In short order, after wiping down tools and sections of the shed floor and door, Vini placed both the towels and the boys' clothes into a trash bag. With so much blood on everything, and thinking it unlikely that all of the stains would come out, she reasoned that it would be best just to throw everything away. Zapor, watching her efforts from a spot

nearby, agreed with her, and actually took the bag for her to the trash bin at the rear of the estate, as Vini made her way up to the house.

At Vini's urging, and with Ben again helping Sam, they all three washed their hands, arms, and faces at a spigot next to the back porch, after which, they collapsed into the porch chairs for a much-needed rest.

During the clean-up, Charlie had been busy in the kitchen. Thankfully, just before noticing the fight and running outside, she had turned off the stovetop burners and taken two trays of cheese straws out of one of the ovens. Unfortunately, the pan of mint crème brownies in the other oven was burned to a crisp. Coming outside shortly after Vini and the boys seated themselves to rest, she brought with her a tray of the cheese straws and a plateful of buttery pecan cookies that she had made earlier. Making another trip, she brought an armful of sodas out for them next, after which, she too sat down with the group.

Perched on the edge of the porch, Zapor declined Charlie's offer of cookies and cheese straws.

Beme and Jelzey were hovering nearby, both feeling very guilty at having been duped into basically taking a vacation that almost got both of their charges killed.

Though they were all still shook up, they felt considerably better than they had only a short time before; and the soda and snacks helped Sam to stop shaking and recover at least some of his energy. Zapor's deep voice and reassuring tone as he addressed Sam further helped calm him. "I believe you became susceptible to possession because you were grieving from the loss of Frances Doyle. I observed that you spent more time with her than your brother did, and surmised that she became something of a mother to you. You used to stay for dinner sometimes, and you played Scrabble and looked through photo albums together."

This was indeed true. Having never really known a mother and in subconsciously longing for one, Sam had spent more time with Mrs. Doyle than his brother, and had gotten very attached to her.

"After her death," Zapor continued, "in experiencing all of the emotional states that come with grief, you kept mainly to yourself, not sharing your feelings much with others."

This, too, was completely true.

"I experienced much grief over her death as well," Zapor added. "But I am relieved in knowing she is with God and at peace."

Also having grieved from the loss, Vini hadn't noticed that Sam was having problems too, or that his grief continued long after hers had softened and become manageable. And in knowing that some people go through the grieving process much more slowly than others, she was basically now kicking herself for having been so unobservant and uncaring towards her friend.

With Zapor's words making sense to him, Sam was nodding as he said, "I knew early on that something bad was inside me, and suspected it was a demon, but I denied it at first. Then, when I knew for sure, it had a strong hold on me, and I felt trapped. I was still inside me too, but it was like I was watching what was happening from a distance, or in a fuzzy dream, and I just kept hoping I would wake up at any moment."

"But surely you would have had plenty of opportunities to kill Ben at home," Charlie said, "so why here, and why today?"

"I fought against the demon the whole time," Sam answered. "Daytimes, I had more control. Then our uncle was around in the evenings, and I think the demon might have feared attacking two people at once. And when we were outside, either Beme or Jelzey was usually around. It was mostly at night that I felt really weak and less able to fight." Addressing Ben, he added, "But you had a bible wrapped in a pillowcase on the nightstand next to your bed. For some reason, I couldn't get close to it. When I tried, my whole insides burned and I had to back off. The one on your bookshelf didn't seem to bother me as much, but I couldn't seem to get near that one on the nightstand."

"The zippered bible," Ben remarked in astonishment to Vini.

In truth, the main reason Ben was instructed to take the bible in the spring was not to keep Kugari from stealing it, but because it would protect him. In knowing that Sam would shortly become possessed, because this was a move by Boko, Etowa had carefully arranged the countermove of the theft of the bible, which, because of its origins and the special verses marked inside, was even more powerful of a deterrent than the one on Ben's bookshelf. The demon would naturally have more control at night with Sam being tired from the day. But in having the bible right next to the head of the bed, Sam would never be able to get close enough at night to kill his brother.

With the bible gone from the house, Sam had fought extra hard during the past week to keep the demon in check. However, feeling incredibly weak this morning, especially after Beme and Jelzey left, with Ben nearby and the tools handy, he had just finally, out of exhaustion, given in.

“I tried the chainsaw first,” Sam added, “but it was broken.”

“Thankfully,” Ben answered, as Vini suddenly realized that this was the reason she needed to allow the gremlin to remain in the shed—so that he could break the chainsaw, which had given Ben at least a little more time to defend himself.

While the dragon tears might have been able to raise someone who had died from a chainsaw attack, and heal up the scars, the sight of the mangling might well have panicked everyone else to the point that they wouldn't have been able to function.

As Vini would reason out later, the unicorn had driven away the gremlin who, thankfully for him, had not been as exposed to the light as the demon had been, or he would have been vaporized as well. And he would now be too scared to come back. Not only that, but having been in such close proximity to a unicorn, the gremlin would not be able to stop shaking for two full days. His little legs had barely managed to carry him away to tuck into the hollow of a tree once used by a fox family as a den, where he would cower for several days before getting brave enough to leave the tree to seek out a new shed, or a garage, or maybe even a workshop, because it was every gremlin's dream to live in a workshop, in order to have lots and lots of mechanical things to break. Unfortunately, there were simply not enough workshops to go around. Prone to fighting with one another, gremlins seldom doubled up with each other. But the scarcity of workshops was not just due to the numbers of gremlins (a fairly large number compared to creatures such as puck trolls and enormice, and growing), but also because some workshops were protected by more than just locks. For instance, one just down the street from the mansion was protected by a huge Saint Bernard, who could sense gremlins, even if he couldn't see them. Wielding a heavy bucket, the dog had already given this particular gremlin a hearty whack when he was peeking into the workshop, in hopeful anticipation of possibly inhabiting it. Not knowing of any other currently unprotected and uninhabited workshops in the area, sitting in

the tree hollow, the gremlin could only dream of a time when he might be able to live in one.

Sipping soda and nibbling on a cheese straw, Vini again wondered why God hadn't simply told her who was possessed. However, flicking at a lone sesame seed on the table, she suddenly realized that He probably had. Recalling that she had seen the snake inside the turtle shell and the rock squirrel in the log, both on days when Sam had been present in the garden, Vini privately scolded herself for missing messages from God. *Once again, I should have been paying closer attention.* Also, since the passage from the bible about not trusting a brother obviously hadn't meant her own brother, and because she had recently spent a lot more time with Ben than with Sam, she felt the message might have actually meant his brother, Sam. So it was not just her powers of concentration that needed fine tuning, but her interpretation skills too.

This had been true of dragons as well because they had been right under her nose the whole time; and in remembering her dream in the spring in which the dove had led her through the woods to the clearing containing the dragon, she realized the answer to finding dragons had been given to her before her search even began. *The burnished doves in my dream were the dragons too, just like in real life. I was just too much of a dunce to see it.*

During all of her research on dragons, she thought she would end up having to travel to some exotic destination to find them. Obviously, this was not the case; and since burnished doves were hard to distinguish from regular doves who were often very colorful, she might have seen them hundreds of times.

With human beings having such limited perceptions, Vini thought, no wonder we can't use the rest of our brain; we have enough trouble using the part we have access to.

As Zapor bid them farewell and departed, Vini helped Charlie carry the tray, plate, and empty soda cans back inside before returning to the porch.

Sam already seemed more like his old self and Vini smiled in relief, not only over having everything turn out so well, but also because she was happy to finally have the possession issue laid to rest.

In again pondering the dragons, she reasoned that they probably had to stay in dove form most of the time because they likely wouldn't have enough to eat as their larger selves. She also imagined this was why they slept so much, to conserve energy.

Back to cooking, in one of the shiny oven doors, Charlie ended up once again seeing the beautiful vision of the gigantic tree and river that she had puzzled over before. This time, the image was clearer, enabling her to see more details of the enormous tree, which was larger than any redwood, more like a skyscraper than a tree, though very lush and full, with its trunk separating into two parts at the bottom to straddle the huge river running through it. Massive twists of tree roots on either side along the sloping banks drank water from the river. The tree had twelve kinds of huge and luscious-looking fruit growing on it, unknown as to their varieties, but definitely recognizable as fruit. Sparkling, as though containing tempered twinkles of unicorn light, the crystal-clear river flowed gently, yet faster than any waters on earth. Charlie was viewing all of this as though standing downstream a short ways. Looking upriver through the vast split in the tree and toward a hill filled with flowering shrubs and carpets of flowers, she could see an amazingly exquisite throne of what appeared to be sapphire, emitting a golden light brighter than any light on earth, and a thousand times more beautiful. Forced to shield her eyes and glance away, as she dared another peek, she saw a human figure that looked like shimmering fiery bronze sitting on the throne, before she was once again forced to look away from the intense radiance.

As she placed another tray of cheese straws into the oven, Charlie smiled happily, realizing she no longer needed to puzzle over the vision because she recognized the Tree of Life from reading about it in the bible. While she didn't know what the vision might mean, she felt very blessed to have had the experience, and she said a prayer of thanks to God, also remembering to thank Him for saving Ben.

The cake and chicken casserole were both nearly done by the time Dave and Violet returned to inform everyone that they were expecting the delivery of materials the next week. Between now and then, Dave would be lining up a couple of guys he thought needed work right now to help erect the greenhouse, since it was more of a job than he and the twins could manage on their own.

Noticing the somewhat subdued demeanor of the kids, Violet pressed them as to what was wrong.

Actually, not much was wrong; they were all just somewhat tired. However, they did take turns sharing most of what had happened with the couple. The only thing they basically left out was that Ben had actually been dead and was raised from the dead. Instead, they said he was injured and that the tears of a dragon had healed him.

Upon hearing about the possession, Violet excused herself to retrieve two crosses on silver chains she had been intending to give the twins for Christmas, having noticed that neither ever wore a cross of any sort. Insisting that they put them on right away, she said, "Hopefully, we can avoid any possibility of possession in the future."

Ben and Sam gladly complied. Vini and Charlie already wore cross pendants, mainly only taking them off during volleyball and water polo activities.

So this is why Sam had been keeping Beme away, Vini thought later at home. If not in obvious danger, the firebirds generally obeyed the twins. But it might not have mattered if Beme was around because, when a person or animal was possessed, most others would be unable to sense the demon inside, other than through the behavior of the one possessed.

In researching the subject of possession in the coming weeks, Vini would find much confusion and controversy over the issue of occupation versus possession, which was something she had briefly discussed with Anei. Wading through the muddle, what would ring true to her was that demons sometimes occupied people just to make them feel sick, to cause illness, and to better control or plant thoughts than they could from a distance. While she felt very unsettled in discovering that a demon could be inside someone and controlling their thoughts without them even knowing it, she did reason that the person would likely feel sick, both body and mind, with something as nasty as a demon inside them, even if only the small corporeal part of the creature. Then, hopefully, the sick feeling would give the person a clue as to what was happening to them. As far as control over actions, this would be more like possession than occupation. However, demons mainly chose not to control the actions a person, who might then become aware of their existence, forcing them to flee, especially if inside of a believer

with the power to resist. Demons also most often didn't want their presence to be known because they couldn't foster unbelief if the world knew about them. Whether occupation or possession, instances were evidently rare because people could drive demons away using various methods such as reading God's Word, praying, or with a cross.

That night, Vini had a dream in which she was sitting on a bench in the garden of the mansion taking notes in her journal. As she pondered and scribbled, the same peacock that had been on the roof of the shed landed in front of her and began telling her some information about dragons that she didn't know. She almost laughed because the talking peacock sounded a lot like Professor Fulhausen, but probably only because the bird had adopted a teaching tone.

"It is a mistake to assume that the smaller size of the burnished dove equals a need for less food than the full-sized dragon," the bird said. "They need as much human goodness and kindness to sustain them regardless of what size they are. However, you are correct to assume that they sleep to conserve energy. They also limit their flight to conserve, which is why the gryphon instructed you to carry the dove. But while conserving their strength right now, they will be unleashed to act in the Endtimes. God will choose to use them because they have awesome fire, even more powerful than firebirds."

As Vini jotted notes, the peacock went on. "Another reason to stay in dove form is to remain inconspicuous and take up less space in smaller caves and caverns, which is where many dragons are sleeping. However, they can't perform healing or others of their duties, like holding back hellfire or fighting sorcerers and demons, when in dove form. They must take the form of a dragon to do this because it's like being wrapped up and needing to be freed in order to free these powers. It's just part of how they were created."

"Thank you," Vini said earnestly, happy to receive such a wealth of information about dragons from such a reliable source.

Waving off the thanks nonchalantly with one wing (and looking a bit like Pizzo while doing so), the bird continued with his mini-lecture. "Just as time does not in any way limit God, size and space do not either. For example, I'm sure you've discovered in your research that all of hell can fit into a thimble, whereas, heaven is endless in size. Well, just think of the numbers of people that have to fit in heaven, each

with a mansion.” With this, the peacock gave a short nod before departing, in the exact manner the one at the camp had, nearly straight upwards in magnificent glory, so much so that it took Vini’s breath away.

Her dream shifted gears after this, to a scene aboard Noah’s Ark. Vini stood with Noah and his family in her dream, waiting patiently for something, which turned out to be the dove returning to the ark with the olive branch, giving proof that land was uncovered. However, while none of the other people seemed to notice, Vini could tell that the dove was not the same one they had sent out. Instead of being white, this dove was mainly a deep turquoise color, with a few hints of other shades of blue mixed into his burnished feathers. In truth, the Rain Dragon was paying a short visit to the ark because he wanted to catch a glimpse of those inside, who had been spared God’s wrath. *They must truly be special human beings to be worthy of such favor from the Lord*, he thought. As Vini was just waking from her dream, she chanced to see a lovely rainbow overlooking the ark.

As she stretched and cheerfully greeted the day, Vini wondered how much of her dream might be true, both what the peacock had told her and the scene aboard the ark. All of it was ringing true from her current perspective. However, as far as hell fitting into thimble, she thought the peacock might have been speaking metaphorically, the thimble being the equivalent of the unimportance of the decrepit beings existing there, having shrunk into practically nothingness.

Up very early, before getting ready for church, she recorded all of the information from her dream in her journal, so as not to forget any of it.

The very last thing she wrote down wasn’t actually from her dream, but she found herself writing it down automatically, before her brain even thought of it. It ended up being the answer to something that had always puzzled her.

“This is the explanation as to why doves often dip only their tails into birdbaths (standing on the edge and turning around to do so), rather than getting really wet like other birds do when bathing: The doves are really dragons and simply need to cool themselves ever so slightly. And they can’t wade in further or get too drenched because they don’t want to extinguish their fire.”

Chapter Nineteen

Thorns and Thistles

At just two weeks before Christmas, on a Wednesday, Violet and Dave were overjoyed to welcome three foster kids to the mansion, who were actually a family, a sister and two brothers. Vini had been working a few extra weekday afternoons leading up to this. From hearing Violet talk in eager anticipation about their coming, she already knew what to expect when meeting them for the first time on the day of their arrival.

Emerson Rae Tremaine was thirteen. Her brother, Kipling Clark Tremaine, was eleven. And their much younger brother, Otto Jackson Tremaine, was about to turn one. Emerson evidently most often liked to be called Em, while Kipling preferred Kip. Otto, it seemed, didn't care, but was always called Otto because not much of a nickname could be made from his name.

The three had been staying with their only living relative, a rather cantankerous great-aunt, Fiona Campbell, whom they simply called Aunt Fiona because it was easier and less formal than Great-Aunt Fiona. Likewise, their aunt always thought of and referred to Em, Kip, and Otto as her niece and nephews, instead of great-niece and great-nephews.

Aunt Fiona was currently ill with cancer. With the medical treatments leaving her weak and nauseas most of the time, she was no longer able to care for her niece and nephews, and had therefore, very reluctantly, sought foster care for them. Their father, it seemed, had died six months before Otto was born, in the crash of a small plane; and their mother had died of pneumonia just after Otto was born.

After meeting the three and helping Violet start dinner by chopping some vegetables for her, Vini headed for home.

Mr. Galloway had finished the second yew cross, which, though smaller, was equally as splendid as the first. He was stringing Christmas lights on it as he waved to Vini passing on the sidewalk.

The evening at the mansion was rather hectic, with Kip and Em getting unpacked and getting things sorted out for starting at their new school the next morning, which was the same middle school Vini had gone to, and that Preston still attended. Otto seemed to take to Violet and Dave right away; however, Em and Kip, not so much, both seeming a little distant and distracted, which was understandable, as they had just been completely uprooted from a home they loved and a school they were comfortable with.

Violet had asked Pizzo to lay low for a bit, so that the kids could get settled in. This was fine with him, as he had plenty of things to do at Heike's house, and both sketching and reading to do at home in his den.

Preston was at the mansion on Friday after school to do some yardwork, because Dave was keeping the twins busy helping to erect the greenhouse, which was nearly halfway built. Tall orange netting roped off the project to keep non-construction people safely out of the area.

Em and Kip ended up calling Violet and Dave, simply Violet and Dave, because this seemed most comfortable for all, and because this was how most other people addressed them. While Preston had once called Violet, Miss Violet, when Dave arrived back from working overseas, it had seemed weird to call him, Mr. Dave; so even Preston had ended up calling the couple simply by their first names.

When Vini came to work again on Saturday morning, it was obvious that things had not been going well for the past couple of days. Not only had a weird tenseness filled the air of the mansion, all of the residents seemed to be walking on eggshells around each other. Vini mainly just tried to be supportive of Violet, while staying out of everyone's way as much as possible.

Em was evidently not happy about having to ride the school bus, though she had ridden the bus where she used to live. Violet confided in Vini she thought Em was just not happy about the change of schools, and was picking the bus to complain about because she was feeling so unsettled.

Kip and Em were both still getting their rooms organized the way they liked them; and Kip was helping Violet with Otto, since Violet was not used to taking care of such a young and little person, who was not quite walking, and not talking, other than occasional gurgles and

squeals. Though he wasn't yet sleeping well at night, thankfully, Otto was eating well and wasn't crying much.

Although Vini encountered no major problems during the morning, with Em scowling a good deal and Violet on edge, she was relieved to head home in the early afternoon, taking extra library books with her because she didn't want to disturb the family by coming back on Sunday.

It quickly became obvious to Violet and Dave that both Em and Kip missed their Aunt Fiona terribly, and Kip even confided to Dave that Em had almost run away when their aunt told them they were going to a foster home, but Em hadn't gone through with it because she thought it might stress her aunt too much.

Violet also very quickly noticed that Em had a lot of anger issues that seemed to stem from the fact that life was basically not fair. But since everyone had to deal with the issue of life not being particularly fair, other than being patient and trying to teach some good coping and problem-solving skills, Violet didn't know what she could do about it.

On Saturday afternoon, Em ended up getting very angry when Violet told her she couldn't watch television because Otto was sleeping in the parlor. The mansion only had one television, on the first floor in the living room which was situated very near the parlor. "Not right now," Violet said. "I need Otto on the first floor during naptime so I can hear if he wakes, and the TV would disturb him."

Kip, indifferent about watching television, went outside to read and keep company with Sam who was pruning the dragonfly topiary.

"But it's not fair," Em complained. "You could go upstairs with him."

"He's already asleep," Violet said, trying to keep her voice down so as not to wake Otto. "Can't you read, or do some homework?" she added.

"I don't feel like reading, and I'm done with my homework," Em responded. "I'm not going to do extra; I hate school. And there's only a week of school left anyway until we're out for Christmas break, so the teachers aren't giving us much homework."

Using school, since Violet had brought it up, Em next tried to make Violet feel guilty by saying, "I work hard at school all week, and I can't even have a little time to watch TV on a weekend."

Dave happened to be inside. With his wife obviously frazzled and close to tears, he stepped in to tell Em, “Television is a privilege, not a right. You can watch in the evening. But if you don’t pipe down, you won’t get to. For now, can’t you find something useful to do?”

Heading up to her bedroom, and stomping on the stairs in frustration, Em ended up slamming her door.

After Em’s departure, being somewhat sleep deprived, Violet did end up in tears, with Dave hugging her. She would have never thought foster parenting would drain so much out of her. Even in such a short time, she was starting to really love Otto; but she never guessed, not even with having been a pro softball player and a nurse, that a kid could take so much energy out of a person. Violet was also growing attached to Kip, and she wanted to like and help Em; but with Em giving her such a hard time, it was presently difficult to do so.

Sitting down with Violet in the kitchen, Dave counseled her. “She’s just frustrated, and grieving. She’s lost both of her parents, and not even all that long ago. And she might be losing her aunt too. For all practical purposes, she has lost her, since they can’t live with her anymore. We just need to give her more time.”

Nodding, and wiping her nose with a handkerchief, Violet agreed.

Inside her bedroom, after screaming silently at the dresser mirror—and actually cussing Violet, which was something she would never do to her face—Em was able to calm down.

Sitting on the bed, she thought about Dave’s words. “...*find something useful to do.*” She didn’t feel like reading, and her room was already picked up; but she did suddenly feel like going to her brother’s room to pick up, which was something she regularly did because she enjoyed keeping things organized and because he didn’t mind.

Coming upstairs with Otto a half-hour later, because the door was open to Kip’s room, Violet happened to notice Em inside, and rearranging her brother’s sock and shirt drawers.

“Oh, he never minds,” Em said in answer to Violet’s query. “And bless his heart, he needs help getting organized.”

The part about Kip never minding when his sister picked up and rearranged his things was at least true. And while he didn’t particularly need help getting organized, he knew that this was something his sister did to cope, so he let her because he knew he was in a way helping her.

In the evening, the whole family watched a movie together, and Em seemed in much better spirits.

The next day, they all attended church.

This was something their Aunt Fiona had made them promise—that they would go to church. She had also reinforced with the foster agency that the family taking the kids had to be Christian, and willing to take the kids to and from church activities.

On Sunday afternoon, finding Em reading in her room, Violet said, “I don’t suppose you’d feel like organizing the sewing room for me; it’s always such a mess.”

Jumping up from the bed, Em jumped at the chance.

It was a three-hour project for Em, and Violet hardly recognized the room afterwards, which was completely and amazingly organized. Since this had been an extra task, aside from regular chores, Violet paid Em for the work.

Vini came Thursday after school, and was happy to see the residents of the mansion in slightly more of a settled state. Violet, at least, seemed much better; but this was mainly due to the fact that Otto was sleeping better at nights, which meant she was too.

Because she had had a somewhat crappy day at school, Em was in a bad mood, and ended up stomping up the stairs and slamming the door to her bedroom shortly after Vini arrived. Violet, at this time, was choosing to ignore the behavior, which actually served to help Em cool down more quickly. At least, with no one scolding her, the screaming at the mirror (this time cussing a teacher) ended up being a very short rant.

When Em showed herself a half-hour later, Vini, having finished cleaning one of the bathrooms, retreated to the basement to do laundry.

While things had improved a little, Vini was glad to have eight full days away from work at the mansion, to both help with the hippotherapy program at camp and to celebrate Christmas with her family.

Piszo was not around the mansion much either because he was spending a lot of time with Heike at the Galloways’ house. On warmer days, they tended to hang out in the garden and under the shed. And when it was cold, they spent time in the attic, which is where they discovered that Mrs. Galloway, at least, was aware of them. She had

left a covered plate of cookies and fudge on a low shelf for them. Pizzo, who knew a lot about Christmas traditions, had thought she might have put them out for Santa, until Heike showed her a note Mrs. Galloway had left with the plate that said, “For you and your little friend, Merry Christmas to you both.”

With Pizzo’s urging, Heike wrote a note back to leave with the empty plate, so that Mrs. Galloway would know their names. “Thank you, from Heike and Pizzo.”

Heike discovered another gift on the same shelf later, a tiny handmade quilt. Mrs. Galloway had been quilting lately, but Heike never guessed she was making one for her.

Christmas was a quiet affair at the mansion. Aunt Fiona had sent Em a coat and a bracelet, and Kip tennis shoes and an autographed baseball. Violet and Dave gave them mostly clothes, but a couple of things from their Christmas wish lists including makeup and a new blow dryer for Em, and two collectible baseball cards and a book for Kip. Otto was much more interested in the box than the toy truck that had been in it. While crawling around, he dragged it with him, occasionally banging it on things. Now, completely in love with him, Violet thought he was an angel. She had never imagined a child so young would be placed in their care, but both she and Dave seemed to be really taking to this “raising a little one.” Of course, they didn’t yet know about the “terrible twos” that would be coming in just about a year.

Vini was back at the mansion early morning two days after Christmas, where she found Em helping Violet with the cataloging project in the subbasement library. With school still out for another full week, they had plenty of time for this, and were making good progress. In fact, Violet was having trouble keeping up with her new helper.

After working the morning, Vini settled in the downstairs library to do some research. Reflecting in wonder that in less than two years she had uncovered the secrets as to how to find both unicorns and dragons, she had no intention of stopping now. Like the location of Noah’s Ark, Vini was sure there were lots of mysterious and magical things still left in the world to discover. And while she wasn’t allowed to reveal where the ark was, she was certain that God did still want her to be diligent in learning everything she could about magical creatures and objects. Why else would he have placed a bagical in her possession, or allowed

her to have a piece of the ark? And while she had no clear message as to what He might want her to find or do next, she was confident that He would, in His own good time, give her clear instructions. In the meantime, she would continue to learn all she could. Having finished Anei's journal, Vini had started reading all of Mrs. Doyle's journals in order, which had helped her understand a few things that had been puzzling before, about various magical creatures and objects, as well as Mrs. Doyle's travels with her husband to find certain artifacts, which Vini was beginning to familiarize herself with at the mansion.

As Vini was getting up for about the fourth time to switch out books, Em made a suggestion to her. "It will be more efficient if you take more books each time, instead of getting up and down so much."

Taking the advice good-naturedly, Vini smiled and said, "Yes, but my grandmother always said, 'Don't carry a lazy man's load because you might drop something.'"

"Cousin Frances used to say that too," Violet said. "I guess that must have been a saying from her generation."

Since she hadn't really had time to do it herself, Vini was very happy that Em was helping Violet with the cataloging.

Violet and Vini were both discovering just how organized Em was in other ways too. She had already color coded things in the pantry, alphabetized the sheet music in the music room, and had been scanning and filing away certain paperwork for Dave to keep his office neat and tidy. Em also folded socks, underwear, and t-shirts in certain ways that Vini had to admit were better than the ways she had learned to fold clothes. And while Em didn't dislike the name, Emerson, part of the reason she liked being called Em was because it was more efficient.

Preston had started teaching Kip archery; and the boys were practicing the whole time Violet, Em, and Vini were in the downstairs library.

Later, when Violet had gone upstairs to relieve Dave of looking after Otto, both Vini and Em took a break from their work to visit, at which point, Em confided in Vini how much she hated her new school.

Vini could definitely relate because she too had hated that particular middle school.

When it also seemed Em was dreading high school the next year, Vini said, "Oh it's much better than middle school, for sure." When Em

seemed skeptical, Vini added, “Charlie and I will both be there to show you the ropes.” (Em had met Charlie when she came two days before Christmas to help Violet with some baking.) “Plus,” Vini added, “high school is still a long ways away for you, almost nine months. Just do the best you can in middle school, and try to look forward to high school, because it’s much better, I promise you. For now, if anyone is bothering you, tell Preston. He’s good at sticking up for people.”

Em had seen Preston a few times at school, mainly because Kip had been hanging out with him some.

“Kip is good at sticking up for people too,” Em told Vini.

With Vini talking about water polo, Em said how much she liked tennis. “I got to go to a tennis camp one summer,” she said.

“The high school has a tennis team,” Vini replied. “I know a couple of girls on the team; they’re really nice. Maybe you could try out.”

“Maybe,” Em said, again seeming skeptical. “I haven’t practiced for a while.”

“The park two blocks from here has tennis courts,” Vini said, “and a backboard so you can practice by yourself.”

Dave was just bringing down a bowl of pretzels and two juice boxes for the girls, and he said, “Violet used to play tennis. But since I don’t play, she hasn’t had anybody to play with lately. I’m sure she’d love to practice with you.”

Violet had told Vini that Em liked to jog, but that she had only gone once since coming to the mansion. With this in mind, Vini said, “Between now and when you try out for the tennis team, maybe go jogging some, to keep up your fitness. This is a good neighborhood for it; I see lots of joggers. You could even probably just do loops around the estate to keep in shape. It’s big enough.”

Em did start jogging regularly after this; and she and Violet ended up playing tennis twice a week, with Em going to the court separately to hit against the backboard another couple of times a week on her own.

In addition to his new interest in archery, Kip was in band, playing the trombone. Vini hardly ever heard him practice, other than faintly, because he had been doing so in the attic.

In the somewhat long conversation over pretzels, Vini also discovered that Em liked to write poetry; and she let Vini read a couple of her poems. One described the hoots, sighs, and chatters of an owl

just before dawn each morning as the owl saying his prayers before going to sleep for the day. The other was about how the aurora borealis was a twinkle in God's eyes, seen by humans during times when God decided to blink. Both poems were completely enchanting, and Vini thoroughly enjoyed them.

"I thought about starting a journal, like you keep," Em told Vini, "but I'd probably keep my poetry in it, instead of research notes."

"That's a good idea," Vini answered, "and there's a box of blank journals on the shelf over there, for whenever you decide you want to start one."

Back at the mansion two days later, taking a break in the morning, Vini visited with both Kip and Em who were spending time with Otto in the music room. They were describing their Aunt Fiona's house to Vini which was evidently situated about fifty miles from the mansion on an old peanut and cotton plantation, though those particular crops were no longer grown on the property.

"They plant a few fields of corn and soybean on the property each year," Em said, "and our aunt usually has a vegetable garden. But that's all right now."

"Part of the house is shut up," Kip said, "because our aunt can't keep up with it. It's a huge house, a lot bigger than this one, like a chateau."

Vini was about to discover that, while Em and Kip had been getting along fairly well with Violet and Dave, they had been squabbling with each other a lot lately, and over some pretty silly things.

"Netherwind Manor is not a chateau!" Em hotly corrected her bother. "It's a manor house. They only have chateaus in France!"

"Well, blah, blah, blah, blah..." Kip said somewhat angrily in retort, to which Em got up and stormed off to her room, stomping on the stairs as she went.

Violet happened to be in the hall and had heard the last few comments of brother and sister; and she couldn't understand why Em had gotten angry, for seemingly so little a reason. "I don't understand what set her off," Violet said.

"There doesn't have to be a reason," Kip replied, as he was leaving the music room to head to the attic to practice his trombone.

Mulling over the conversation about the plantation and house, Vini surmised and told Violet, “I think it was talking about their aunt that did it; she’s still missing her a lot.”

Em was once again screaming silently into the mirror of her bedroom, this time cussing herself because she knew she shouldn’t have gotten angry. Sometimes she didn’t even know why she was angry, she just was, and feeling like screaming and hitting something.

As they were all in the kitchen later, just finishing up lunch, able to tell by the look on Em’s face that she was still angry, Violet suggested, “When you feel upset or angry, try taking a walk, or a stroll in the gardens, to burn off some energy. Or maybe go for a jog.”

“Are you trying to get rid of me?” Em retorted. “Why did you take in foster kids if you don’t want them around? If it’s too much work for you and you can’t handle it, maybe you shouldn’t be a foster parent.”

While Vini had been trying to stay out of the family’s business, she couldn’t help saying, “There are much worse places you could end up, Em. You shouldn’t be so critical.”

As Vini was heading to the downstairs library, Em asked, “What are you still doing here anyway, if you’re done with work for the day?”

While Vini didn’t respond, Violet did, reminding Em of something she had already told her. “She’s has access to the books any time.”

Kip hadn’t been completely innocent lately either in that he had been ignoring his chores, mainly because he was testing, to see what he might be able to get away with.

“Everyone has to do chores,” Dave reinforced at the table in the kitchen later in the afternoon. “It’s just the way of life.”

Overhearing part of the conversation as she was getting a new pack of pencils from a kitchen drawer, Vini described some of her chores at home, and Preston’s, which seemed to amount to quite a bit more than Kip and Em were being asked to do. “Believe me,” she added, “I’d rather not have to empty the dishwasher every day when I get home from school. And I know Preston would rather not sweep the garage three times a week. But we have to. Everyone has to pitch in, or things don’t get done. If only one person ends up taking on the burden of everything, they wear themselves out. And that’s not fair, or healthy.”

As she was heading out of the kitchen, she heard Dave tell Kip, “If you don’t pick up after yourself and keep up with the chores, you won’t get to go to the movies with Preston on the weekend.”

Late in the day, after Vini had gone home, Violet was putting some laundry in Em’s room. (Em was downstairs at the time.) Hanging a shirt in the closet, Violet discovered two canvas grocery totes stuffed in the far back of the closet, behind a couple of shoe boxes and an overnight case.

The bags contained a stash of provisions taken from the kitchen and pantry—granola bars, a can of nuts, boxes of raisins, dry cereal in zipper bags, and even four apples.

Because Dave had told her what Kip had confided about Em wanting to run away from their aunt’s house, rather than being put in foster care, Violet became extremely worried.

Carrying the bags downstairs, she found Em in the parlor, on the floor playing with toy trucks and cars with Otto.

As calmly as possible, sitting down on the divan, Violet said, “We can’t keep food like this in the bedrooms; it will attract bugs and mice. It needs to stay in the pantry.” Thinking that Em might get upset that she had been looking in her closet, Violet hastened to add, “I was just putting up your laundry when I noticed the bags. Why are you stashing food in the closet?”

Em didn’t get upset. Instead, after thinking for a few moments, she quietly responded, “I was keeping it in case you decided to kick us out.” Moving up to the couch to sit next to Violet, who was looking at her in confusion, Em said, “We stayed two days at another place before coming here, and we didn’t have as much to eat as we have here. Plus, if you don’t want us, I’m not sure anyone else will either. So, in case we end up on our own, I figure we’ll need something to eat.”

“I’m not going to kick you out,” Violet said, firmly. “You won’t be going anywhere from here, unless you can go back to your Aunt Fiona’s house.”

With this, Em started crying.

Leaning forward, Violet hugged her, even though Em somewhat resisted at first. But with Violet grabbing her anyway, she suddenly completely gave in, and hugged Violet back, so hard, in fact, that it almost hurt.

Violet was tearful too, as she again tried to reassure Em. “You, Kip, and Otto are all staying here until you can go back to your Aunt Fiona. And if for some reason you can’t go back, you will stay here from now on. This is your home now, or second home, however you want to look at it.”

Vini, before going home for the day, had pulled a book for Em, leaving it on the table in the downstairs library where Em had been stacking books and making notes in a binder for the cataloging project. Going down to the library after dinner, Em found the book, which had a chapter bookmarked and a note from Vini on the top that said, “Read up on the stages of grief. Then you will know when you are experiencing them and can take steps to counter.”

Em hadn’t particularly realized that she was still grieving over the loss of her parents, and now over no longer being able to live with her Aunt Fiona. Seeing herself and her situation in the descriptions, she found the book very interesting. She had indeed been slipping in and out of the five stages of grief, which included denial, anger, depression, bargaining, and acceptance. And this explained why she sometimes got so angry, and didn’t sleep well, and was distracted at school.

The next day, the three new arrivals ended up finding out about Pizzo, who threw a pencil at Kip when he accidentally bumped into one of Louetta’s paintings in the music room. And he threw a butterscotch candy at Em, who was also in the music room, just for good measure, as a kind of warning, so that she too might take care with the paintings. Having decided he had had enough of hiding in his own home, Pizzo next brought the fireplace cat to life, so that the cat could play with Otto, who was not only delighted by the cat, but also by his new little troll friend.

Preston and Vini were at the mansion working, and were both a little surprised that Em and Kip weren’t more surprised by Pizzo.

“Well, you should see what goes on at our aunt’s house,” Kip said, with Em nodding heartily in agreement.

While Kip didn’t elaborate at the moment, Vini did learn later that he had confided in Preston about a good many magical happenings at his Aunt Fiona’s house, including visits by a ghost. Having discovered that magic exists just about everywhere, Vini wasn’t particularly surprised, especially because Kip and Em had described their aunt as

being very religious, and the supernatural always seemed to surround truly godly people.

When Otto tired of playing with the cat (or perhaps vice versa because the cat suddenly seemed more interested in visiting the upstairs of the house than playing with the little boy), Pizzo was given rides in the back of a toy truck as Otto pushed it around the room.

When he got tired of pushing the truck, Otto surprised everyone by standing up and taking his first steps, which amounted to five in total, before his little legs collapsed and he landed on his bottom, padded not only by his diaper, but also by his quilted corduroy pants. Instead of crying, Otto giggled, before getting back up to again walk, this time taking seven steps before again sitting.

Dave and Violet were sorry to have missed his first steps, but were elated that Otto was making the milestones he should in accordance with his age.

Late in the afternoon, Kip and Preston ended up teaching Pizzo a bean bag toss game in the back yard, in the hopes that it would help the little troll get some of the “throwing things” out of his system.

Learning quickly, and after only a few tosses, Pizzo proved much better at the game than either of the boys, who were completely in awe of his abilities, since he was throwing the exact same distances as they were. Pizzo loved the game and ended up teaching it to Heike, who turned out to have an even better throwing arm than he did.

As Vini was leaving for the day with Preston, she sensed Zapor and Folto somewhere nearby, though she never saw them. Since the gryphons didn't make themselves known, she wondered what they might be doing in the area.

Chapter Twenty

Aunt Eugenia

The next day was New Year's Eve, and a fabulous afternoon party was scheduled to celebrate Pizzo's birthday. If Em, Kip, and Otto hadn't already found out about Pizzo, Violet had been planning to introduce him to everyone at his party. Now, there was no need, and everyone could simply enjoy the celebration, which was a rip-roaring bash, complete with fifties music from the 45 records (which Pizzo had decided that he loved) and Kip playing the trombone. Heike had been invited, and she and Pizzo ended up dancing on the coffee table.

Charlie had come very early to do most of the cooking, but Em had made homemade peanut butter cups for Pizzo. They all had a great feast. Pizzo, especially, consumed massive quantities of food, so much so that Violet was almost cringing, in fear that he might actually burst himself. Heike, like most puck trolls, had a good appetite too; but it was not as large as Pizzo's. In truth, since his mother had only been able to have one child (due to the not-enough-food thing), when Pizzo was a youngling troll, she began to worry that even her one child might not have enough to eat, so she began to feed him people food as a supplement, never dreaming he would develop such a liking for it, though it wasn't a true supplement, only occasionally providing him with a little extra energy and not any real sustenance.

In addition to large bags of gumdrops and licorice allsorts, Pizzo's gifts included two dollhouse easy chairs from Dave and Violet, a mini sketch pad from Vini, a set of small-sized comic books from Preston, and a tiny stuffed-animal white poodle from Charlie that Pizzo right away named Boomer-Too.

Pizzo ended up having to sleep for twelve hours straight to recover from the excitement of his party.

Four days after the party marked the Saturday before school was set to start again, and Kip accompanied Preston to a martial arts lesson in the morning.

While Kip had been on a guest pass, since he seemed to like the class, Violet signed him up for more lessons. Sam and Ben had already offered to help Preston teach Kip archery, which he also seemed to be enjoying.

Violet had bought Em a new tennis racquet because her older one was not such a good model as to help her prepare for hopefully getting on the high school team. Em was doing well in rededicating herself to her tennis and overall fitness. In addition to practicing tennis at the park with Violet, and going on her own to hit against the backboard, she had started jogging four mornings a week, very early, so that she would be able to keep to the routine even when school started again the next week.

In addition to tennis and fitness, Em liked to sew, and she had been secretly making Pizzo some new clothes, in the form of two pairs of trousers, one green and one blue, and three shirts each of a different type of plaid, all of which she presented to the little troll after church on Sunday. She was working on a polka dot seersucker shirt and a pair of jeans for him too, but she hadn't finished them yet. She also had plans to make Heike, who often did her own sewing, a couple of dresses and a flannel shawl. The new clothes fairly astounded Pizzo, who ended up impulsively giving Em a hug, which surprised both of them, especially since he had lately been inclined to throw a lot of things at her, mainly when she was acting cranky.

Shortly after school started again, Em and Kip found out that their Aunt Fiona was doing extremely well with her cancer treatments, which had been taking place at a large cancer care center out of state, and was expected to come home in a couple of weeks. Violet and Dave were planning to take Em, Kip, and Otto to visit her at home probably early February, after giving her a chance to settle back in and set up with home health care and a physical therapist to help her regain her strength.

The greenhouse was finished by the second week in January. While Kip was somewhat indifferent to growing food in winter, Em took an interest and helped Dave get some plants started in it.

Mr. Galloway also took an interest in it, because he had long wanted to have a greenhouse. However, his own plans for one ended up being scratched because he and Mrs. Galloway had decided on another type of venture. Shortly after Dave had told him about and then shown

him the tunnels, Mr. Galloway had taken it upon himself not only to open up his fallout shelter, but also clear the cave-in, in order to reopen the tunnel running to the mansion. He had also investigated and found out that the farm the other tunnels led to was for sale. The property had been only half-used for many years, and was currently listed at a bargain price because the house, barns, pens, and equipment were in need of repairs. Mr. and Mrs. Galloway had both grown up on farms, and were planning to buy this one, and hopefully do something like what Dave and Violet were doing, in growing food for the local food bank. They were also hoping to perhaps do a community garden, so that people in the area could come and grow their own food.

The clearing of the tunnel had taken Mr. Galloway a good part of a month, even with a helper, who was none other than Frank Wharton. Frank, in an effort to do something of a turn-around in his life, had sincerely apologized to Mr. Galloway and had asked if he could pay part of the damages he owed in work, which ended up being fine with Mr. Galloway.

As it turns out, Frank was not such a bad kid after all, just misguided by his parents, as many youths are, especially when parents are more interested in being their kids' friends than in being parents. Mr. Galloway was a good influence on Frank, treating him much as he had his own son, who was now grown with a family of his own and living in another state. They kept to strict schedules; and Mr. Galloway was strict as to doing quality work, particularly because Frank was not only helping with clearing the tunnel, but with gardening and small home maintenance and repairs as well. Frank had also expressed an interest in working on the farm—if Mr. Galloway for sure acquired it—while going to college which he planned to start in the fall.

Mid-January found Dave excitedly getting ready for a trip to help Violet's Aunt Eugenia move to the mansion. Dave would be flying up, and then renting a one-way truck to drive back in tandem with Aunt Eugenia, who would be driving her own car packed with some of her clothing and breakables. The truck only needed to be a small one because Aunt Eugenia was bringing only smaller items of furniture along with various other personal belongings.

They arrived at the mansion exactly four days after Dave departed. With Ben and Sam helping with the unloading, Aunt Eugenia, who

wanted everyone to call her Aunt Eugenia, was settled in very quickly. Equally quickly, everyone seemed to take to her, and gravitate to her, Kip and Em especially. In fact, they almost thought she might have been a clone of their Aunt Fiona; and they remarked so, except that their aunt was taller and had dyed red hair, instead of gray hair like Aunt Eugenia. (Em and Kip didn't yet know that their aunt had lost her hair during her cancer treatments.)

"God must have sent her," Em told Kip in private. "Remember what Aunt Fiona said, that God will make all things happen for good."

Piszo also really took to Aunt Eugenia, and not just because she had been a sculptress and he admired her work—mainly bronzes, ranging from about one foot to three feet in height, about twenty of which she had brought with her—but also because she liked to tell stories, of all sorts, including bible stories, magical fairy tales, and even stories about growing up as a kid in the big city of Philadelphia. Piszo had never seen a big city and was completely fascinated. Indeed, sitting on the rug by Aunt Eugenia's bed (or sometimes on top of one of her slippers when she wasn't wearing them), he would listen raptly, along with Em and Kip, while she sat in her rocking chair to tell the tales.

Vini, when taking breaks from working and doing research, also liked to hear the stories; and one day in particular, she was completely surprised to find Zapor and Folto listening in as well, perched on the balcony outside Aunt Eugenia's room, upon which they barely fit. While Piszo and Vini both knew they were there, Em and Kip, also in the room for story time, didn't seem to be aware of the gryphons' presences. Aunt Eugenia also seemed unaware.

Aunt Eugenia reminded Vini of a feisty version of Mrs. Doyle, but about ten years younger, at age seventy-two. But perhaps she was more like Annabelle, in being fairly talkative, while Frances had always been more quiet and pensive. While Aunt Eugenia had had gall bladder surgery the previous year, she now seemed completely healed. She did take the stairs slightly more slowly than Mrs. Doyle ever had; but this was mainly in getting used to the stairs, since she had lived for many years in a ranch-style house that didn't have them.

Aunt Eugenia proved a tonic to Em and Kip whenever they were upset, and a manager for them when they were acting up. Indeed, whenever Kip was shirking chores, Aunt Eugenia ended up getting him

back on track. Likewise, with Em arriving home from school in a bad mood, at least three days a week (mainly because she still hated school), Aunt Eugenia was very quickly able to help her improve her attitude. Though she was strict, the pair never seemed to mind when she told them to “sit up straight” or “wipe your feet” or “tuck in your shirt” or “stop scowling.” She also often instructed “Say *may* I be excused from the table, not *can* I.”

In truth, both Kip and Em listened to Aunt Eugenia more than to Dave and Violet, and obeyed much more readily.

On a particular afternoon, when Em was exceedingly grumpy and griping, and Kip hadn’t picked up his room or taken out the trash as he was supposed to, which meant he wasn’t going to his next martial arts lesson, Aunt Eugenia called both of them to her room to have a talk with them for about fifteen minutes.

Afterwards, the pair turned into perfect angels.

A couple of days later, Violet, who had noticed that they had been called in for a talk just before turning into these sweet-natured and completely-compliant kids, asked her aunt, “What did you say? Did you threaten them?”

“In a way,” Aunt Eugenia replied, in a matter-of-fact tone. “And I’d do it again, if I had to.” With Violet looking at her somewhat in disbelief and in slight disapproval, she related the full story, showing Violet a bible passage before doing so, which was Hebrews 6:7-8. “For land which has drunk the rain that often falls upon it, and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed; its end is to be burned.”

After Violet had a chance to read the passage, Aunt Eugenia said, “I started by getting them to read what you just read. Afterwards, I told them that they were acting like thorns and thistles. I then explained to them that hellfire is very real and that they had better shape up, especially because their parents are both in heaven and will for sure want to see their kids again in the future, in eternal life. I told them that if they didn’t want to end up in the other place, burning, they needed to mend their ways.”

“But behaviors don’t determine being saved,” Violet protested. “Believing in and accepting Christ determine that. Plenty of sinners are

still going to heaven because salvation isn't based on either bad behaviors or good works."

"I know," Aunt Eugenia responded. "But people still need to repent when they sin, because it's a slippery slope. Rebellion often comes with bad behavior, and then people end up rejecting Christ."

"True," Violet agreed.

"Plus, I truly believe the kind of eternal life we will have in heaven will be determined by the kind of life we lead here," Aunt Eugenia added. "They might not lose their salvation, but they could lose their reward."

Violet agreed with this as well. And since she also believed that children should read the bible and be aware that hellfire is real, and not a myth, she had to admit that she approved of the means her aunt had used to get the kids back on track.

Aunt Eugenia also confided to Violet that God had told her to come to the mansion. "I didn't want to at first," she admitted. "I hate being uprooted. But I had to obey. And now I know why I was needed here. So those two can turn into the people both God and their Aunt Fiona mean for them to be." With Violet nodding, she finished with, "I think they just don't understand why so many bad things have happened to them, and the people they love. But understanding is only something living life and trusting in God can teach."

During the next story time in Aunt Eugenia's room, Pizzo brought to life one of her bronze sculptures, a circus bareback rider (a young girl on an Arabian horse), who rode around the room performing for them.

Laughing and clapping her hands, Aunt Eugenia said, "Just don't bring the clown to life. I'm afraid of clowns."

Pizzo was very surprised to hear this. In knowing that circus clowns were some of the most wonderful and magical of all human beings, he found it very hard to imagine anyone being afraid of them. However, since he was also able to know that Aunt Eugenia was telling the truth, he gave her a solemn nod in promise.

On a day when Charlie was at the mansion, baking up wonderful goodies for everyone, Em was once again fretting about the prospect of starting high school in the fall. She was hanging out in the kitchen with Charlie and Vini, who were both reassuring her that they would be there

to help her, when Preston and Kip tumbled in from archery practice in the back yard in search of snacks and drinks.

After rummaging in the refrigerator, the boys ran up the Kip's room to get something before heading back outside, joshing with each other and talking loudly as they tromped up the stairs.

Shaking her head, Vini told Em, "Preston's rubbing off on Kip; your brother was so quiet when you guys first got here."

"Kip's always been loud," Em answered. "And it's always really annoying when I'm trying to write poetry, or read. But I guess maybe he took a while to show his true colors in a new place."

As the pair passed noisily through the kitchen again, Vini had a sudden revelation as to why her brother and certain other boys might be so loud. *They are loud because they don't feel like people hear them.* With this idea completely ringing true, she suddenly felt very guilty about all of the times she had either ignored or tuned out Preston, not only not listening to him, but also often not taking what he had to say seriously. And she resolved right then and there to start listening to her brother more, and Kip too, if he happened to want to talk.

That afternoon, Violet found Kip and Preston playing on the tunnel-slide with Aunt Eugenia, who was already on her third trip down. And they all three ended up being very loud in their glee.

During Vini's next youth group meeting, she herself ended up in a rather loud and lively discussion, in having a debate over belief in things like astrology, which Vini believed was real.

"It's absolutely true that people born in certain months have certain personality traits," she said. "It's the way God designed things. And as far as people who tell fortunes, God has given some people the gift of prophecy. Even if they don't all do good things with their gifts, there's no denying that they have them. And I can't believe that all of these things originate from Satan because many people do end up doing good things with their talents. With regards to magic, fantasy, and magical creatures," she added earnestly, "there are lots mentioned in the bible—dragons, demons, night hags, sorcerers, giants, leviathans, and many more. So they are absolutely real. In talking about magic itself, God is the magic. Magical objects are real too."

Almost also saying, "Unicorns are real," Vini caught herself, because she knew that she was starting to give too much away. Taking

a breath, as well as a pause, she went on more carefully. “As far as numbers and people putting meaning into them for superstitions and philosophies, numbers are important in the bible.”

“In music too,” Gwen said. “Music is based on numbers, math really.”

“But we do really have to be careful not to place too much importance on things like astrology and numbers,” Vini added, “so as not to take away from things that are much more important, like God’s Word. Plus, all human philosophies are piddly compared to God’s way of thinking.”

The debate that went on for nearly the entire hour of the meeting was wide ranging, with a skeptical guy named Rick Provost (that Vini didn’t know very well) even mentioning that Noah’s Ark might have just been a metaphor.

While Vini didn’t comment, because she wanted to be careful, several people responded by assuring Rick that there was a lot of scientific evidence of a worldwide flood.

“And I don’t think angels really have wings,” Rick said. “It’s just the way they are symbolically described in the bible. God is a big fan of using symbolism.”

To this, Vini did respond.

“But even if angels don’t really have wings, we will see them with wings because that’s the way our brains work, and how our eyes work. We can’t see things where God is because He is outside of everything that He created, outside of all of the dimensions that we are in. So I believe the bible describes angels to us in the way we will actually see them, with wings, resembling something our brains can understand. Like, while we might not be able to comprehend an angel, we can understand the wings of a bird.”

“Maybe they have wings only when they need to fly,” Michael Hernandez suggested.

“Maybe they don’t even fly,” Justine Reynolds speculated. “They might move around some other way. But I agree that we might see them as flying, because of the way our eyes work.”

“Speaking of eyes,” Gwen said, “I just read an article that scientists have proven that the human eye had to have been created, designed

actually, and that it could not have evolved, as anything relating to how animals have evolved in nature.”

“I’ve read about that too, and it’s exactly true,” Tom Pearson chimed in. “And I think it ties in with the theory of Intelligent Design. Human eyes are backwards as to how the eyes of certain animals have evolved. Scientists claim they wouldn’t have designed human eyes in such a fashion because it wouldn’t make sense to do so. The information is all very scientific and complex, but one thing has to do with the light receptors of human eyes being in the wrong place to have evolved. They are actually opposite what they should be. A couple of teachers in public schools were teaching this, in order to present all of the facts in an open-minded way, so that students could have full information to be well informed; and, of course, the teachers got into trouble.”

“That’s so sad,” Vini said, recalling her own school troubles over free speech.

“Very sad,” Gwen agreed, “that teachers can’t even teach scientific things in school when those things are in any way related to God, Who is the Ultimate Scientist, and Magician,” she added, looking sideways at Vini, and smiling.

“It seems schools these days are going to great lengths to prevent free speech and free thinking,” Tom said. “What next? Are they going to put people on jail for having certain thoughts?”

To this discussion, Marion Wills added, “Human speech and language could not have ‘evolved’ either. That’s been scientifically proven as well.”

At home, as she sat thinking about the meeting, in realizing she had been a somewhat heated, and perhaps overzealous, in defense of what she believed in, Vini said a short prayer. *Dear Lord, please help me always handle everything with a spirit of gentleness, especially when I’m disagreeing with people. In Your name I pray, Amen.*

Opening the bible just after the prayer, her eyes fell upon one of her favorite passages, James 3:17-18. “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity. And the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”

She also recalled the passage Mr. Galloway had quoted to her from First Peter, which she looked up and read as a reminder to always handle things with gentleness and reverence while being zealous.

Vini had a dream that very night in which a group of famous people who had rejected the bible and Christ, and who had convinced many others to follow their wickedness, had all died and gone to hell. After getting over their initial shock of being there, they wondered why they didn't have any significant status there, which might provide them some relief from the pain and torment they were suffering along with all of the other slaves in hell. Getting the attention of Satan, they asked him why he didn't favor them, and provide relief for them, since they had actually brought him a lot of the souls he had collected. Satan basically laughed when explaining, "I'm not human. I don't have compassion, love, gratitude, mercy, empathy. Those things are all specific to the Father, and things He gave to His children. I am not one of His children. And, now, you aren't either, having rejected His Son, which would have been your only avenue of escape from this nightmare."

Vini's dream next shifted to something rather foggy and distant; and she couldn't quite tell what she was seeing, other than a street lined with houses with a lone figure standing on one end of it, facing away. As she watched, an angel swooped in with a sword and killed a demon sneaking up behind the person, who didn't see either the demon or the angel. And it was hard to understand why the person hadn't seen anything because, from Vini's viewpoint, the angel looked brilliant white and full of light; and he did indeed have wings, spanning eight feet at least. His sword flashed with light as it smote the demon who dissipated in a mere instant. At the exact point of the sword flash and the vanishing of the demon, Vini woke to the first glints of morning light peeking in through her bedroom window.

After school the next day, as she was making a few notes in her journal in her bedroom, Vini considered that she might ask Aunt Eugenia about some of the things discussed at the youth group meeting. Being a longtime biblical scholar, she would surely have some good input on these subjects.

At the exact moment Vini was thinking of this, Aunt Eugenia was in the process of telling Kip and Em that she thought they were truly improving and becoming exactly the kind of people that both God and

their Aunt Fiona would want them to be, after which, she showed them another bible quote, Isaiah 55:13. ““Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign which shall not be cut off.””

Smiling, both brother and sister were happy that Aunt Eugenia felt they were becoming more like cypresses and myrtles, instead of thorns and thistles, or, in the case of this particular bible quote, thorns and briars.

Chapter Twenty-One

Winding the Clock

Getting ready for church on the first Sunday in February, Vini decided to wear her pin-on watch, the one she had gotten on her trip to Italy, given to her by the son of the owner of a clock shop, a boy named Cyril who had become her pen pal. As she was pinning it on, then making an adjustment because she hadn't gotten it very straight to start with, something strange that she hadn't noticed before caught her eye. Quickly unpinning the watch, and carrying it to the window for the better light, she saw the bagical symbol marked on the very top of the watch. Since the symbol was faint and worn, it was easy to understand how she had missed seeing it before. *Magic is truly everywhere, she marveled, in every corner of the world, and often right under our very noses.* And while she had known this to be true for some time, she was still often fairly astounded by the concept.

I wonder what it might do, she thought, peering even more closely at the watch. *Maybe it's a watch that can stop time.* However, she quickly realized her thinking on this matter was very limited, almost as if she was stereotyping the watch. *It might not have anything to do with time. It might have something to do with...cows...or homework...or anything. Or maybe it can lead to more dragons. A dragon locator,* she joked with herself.

Preston had invited Kip to the house for Sunday afternoon, during which the boys practiced some of their martial arts moves on mats in the basement for an hour or so before settling in Preston's room to read comic books. At Preston's urging, Kip ended up taking several comics home with him on loan, which greatly surprised Vini who knew her brother considered them to be some of his most prized possessions; indeed, he hardly ever even let her touch the books.

Vini went to the mansion on Tuesday after school to do a little research. With Em and Violet off playing tennis, Dave and Kip doing something in the greenhouse, and Aunt Eugenia looking after Otto in

her room upstairs, the house was very quiet when Vini headed downstairs.

Since magical creatures and happenings were often associated with bible history and prophecy, she had been branching out into the religious books of the libraries, instead of just focusing on the subjects of mythology and folklore. In doing so, she was finding even more information than she might have imagined. On this particular afternoon, she was completely captivated by a vicar's account of a tiny fairy-like creature called a spreesprite living in the bell tower of his church. While evidently full of mischief, the spreesprite could also be very helpful at times in performing small chores such as mending rips in curtains and fixing broken bell-pulls.

Leaving the mansion a short while later with a pack full of books, just as Em and Violet were returning, Vini was delighted to discover Tulko waiting for her in the garden to take her on a short ride before dropping her off at home in time for dinner. Passing over Anei's church, Vini waved to the gargoyles, who heartily waved back at her.

On that same evening, when refilling Boomer's stainless steel water bowl, Charlie saw a vision in the side of the bowl, which was again the image of the Tree of Life with the river running through it, and the fiery figure. However, this time, something was added. In having to once more look away from the brightness of the figure on the throne, her gaze shifted to a meadow beside the great tree, which contained a lone occupant—a newly-born white horse, so new that its legs still wobbled. The vision ended exactly there.

On Saturday, in coming home from work in the afternoon and plopping down on her bed, just for fun, Vini put on the rose-colored glasses. As if finding out her watch was magical wasn't enough, she was about to discover something else pretty incredible. The zippered bible happened to be on her nightstand because she had been reading it the night before. On the spine she saw the bagical symbol, invisible for some reason; either that, or just super faded; and the glasses, being magical, were picking it up.

Vini could hardly believe that someone had dared to put a bible into a bagical. *It's already a magical book*, she thought.

While she now knew that the bible had been in a bagical, and that she maybe should be wary, she didn't think the zippered bible could be in any way bad because it had helped her find unicorns.

Opening the bible and casually flipping through it, she read a couple of the passages bracketed in pencil that had led her to the first unicorn. Still flipping, her eyes met something very odd, and she almost couldn't believe what she was seeing—a quote marked in brackets that she hadn't noticed before.

Impossible, she thought. *I searched this bible many times, each page, and wrote down all of the bracketed passages.* Vini was smiling because her brain was already scolding her. *Nothing is impossible with God.*

Still smiling, and feeling incredibly elated, she carefully read the quote of Psalm 91:11. “For he will give his angels charge of you to guard you in all your ways.”

Again turning pages, she found another quote bracketed that she knew also wasn't marked before, Isaiah 52:8. “Hark, your watchmen lift up their voice, together they sing for joy; for eye to eye they see the return of the LORD to Zion.”

About to record the two passages in her journal, Vini suddenly recalled the dream she had had in which an angel had saved someone from a demon, and she wrote without thinking, “The watchmen are angels.” Then, again automatically, she wrote, “When we can't take care of things ourselves, God always has a back-up plan. Often, the watchmen come into play. There are many watchmen because angels are not subject to the not-enough-to-eat rule that limits other magical creatures. They are often nourished by light, God's light. Since God is unlimited, they always have enough nourishment. They also eat manna and other heavenly foods. Angels simply worship and serve God. From the smallest cherub to the tallest archangel, basically all the ranks of God's Heavenly Host, any can be a watchman, and many are assigned to watch after His children.”

Since she hadn't read any of this information in her research, Vini recognized the automatic writing as a special gift God was giving her, and another way in which He was communicating with her.

Looking in the zippered bible again, she found yet another bracketed passage that she had never noticed before, Micah 7:4. “The

best of them is like a brier, the most upright of them a thorn hedge. The day of their watchmen, of their punishment, has come; now their confusion is at hand.”

Vini took this to mean that angels don’t just save people, they dole out punishment as well, which was something she already knew from the bible. Indeed, as described in multiple places in the bible, a single angel had killed one hundred and eighty-five thousand Assyrian soldiers in one night.

That night, Vini once again had the dream of an angel saving someone on a residential street from a demon, whom the angel again dispatched with a sword. This time, Vini was able to see the person who had been saved much closer. It was a girl; and as the girl turned slightly, Vini was astonished to find that she was looking at herself! Still unaware of the angel standing behind her, the figure of herself also didn’t see a thin wispy man walk up (in a floaty kind of way) and shake the angel’s hand, as if thanking him for something.

Still amazed that she was actually watching herself, Vini suddenly realized exactly when and where the scene taking place in her dream had happened, which was when she and Tulko had stopped the house break-in at the very end of last summer. While Tulko kept the two would-be burglars in check until the police came, Vini had waited for him on the street where he had picked her up a short while later.

And while she had been unaware of it at the time, what she was seeing in her dream actually did happen. Boko sent the demon at a time when Etowa was unable to counter the move, and when Tulko was occupied, and when Vini (in not noticing the demon) would not have had time to call a unicorn or otherwise defend herself.

As the wispy man floated off on a side street, drifting well out of sight, the angel suddenly turned and walked toward the Vini that was watching the unaware Vini (the one still waiting for Tulko). When he reached her position, with a soft smile, the angel simply said, “Read Song of Solomon 8:13-14. It is a message from God.”

With this, Vini suddenly awoke—scrambling with her bible and a flashlight since it was still dark—to do exactly as the angel bade her.

“O you who dwell in the gardens, my companions are listening for your voice; let me hear it. Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spices.”

Vini interpreted this to mean that she should stay diligent and keep going with her research, because those in company with God were waiting to see what she would do next, to find out the rest of her story. God, of course, already knows everyone's story; but His companions, those watching, end up seeing things as they play out, and not all at once like the Father.

She had already found unicorns and dragons. *So...what next...?*

Vini smiled in thinking about her grandparents that had passed away, standing side-by-side with angels gazing down upon her from heaven and waiting expectantly for her to do something wonderful.

Writing the quote from Song of Solomon down, Vini thought about the angel. He definitely had wings. *Or...did he?* She saw wings when he swooped down using his sword, then she didn't see them when he was talking to her. Or perhaps she just didn't notice them.

On the third Saturday in February, Dave and Violet were taking Em, Kip, and Otto to see their Aunt Fiona. Vini had been invited to go with them, and was very excited about the prospect of seeing the house that Em and Kip had been talking about. Aunt Eugenia was going too; in fact, they were taking her car along with Violet's because they all couldn't fit into one car.

It took right at an hour to get there, and Netherwind Manor turned out to be every bit as amazing as Kip and Em had described—a simply enormous brick manor house, easily four times the size of Doyle Mansion, and on a plantation still nearly five hundred acres in size, despite a large parcel of the property being sold off a few years back. One of the first things Vini noticed was several gargoyles perched on top of the house.

Inside, taking in the massive foyer and center staircase, Violet discreetly said to Vini, “Imagine having to keep this house clean. Even with both of us, it would be a struggle.”

Aunt Fiona was wearing a scarf on her mostly-bald head. Though her hair was starting to grow back, she didn't have enough of it yet to dye red as per her usual custom, so she felt more comfortable just covering it up. She was also starting to put on a little of the weight she had lost during treatments. Part of the reason she hadn't wanted the kids to visit sooner was because she wanted to get back to looking more like her normal self before seeing them again. Em and Kip definitely

understood that they couldn't come back to live with their aunt just now, even before she told them, "I just wouldn't be able to look after Otto, and I don't want to separate you kids. Brothers and sisters should always stay together while they are growing up."

Unknown to Vini, Aunt Fiona had a watchman close by, one that had also kept watch over her during all of her medical treatments. Since it was not yet her time to go, the angel had been watching to make sure that the doctors and nurses did everything needed, and correctly, for her to get better.

Violet had brought two hampers full of picnic food (which Charlie had helped prepare on Friday evening) for them to all have at lunch together and so that they wouldn't burden either Aunt Fiona or the small staff at Netherwind with having to feed the guests.

After they ate, Aunt Fiona declared, "I've never had such an amazing feast. And I can't believe I'm finally getting my appetite back." Violet ended up leaving all of the leftovers at Netherwind so that Aunt Fiona could enjoy them later.

The same evening they got back, Violet ended up discovering another secret alcove about two feet square, this one in the master bedroom. In bending down to pick up a shoe, she accidentally fell forwards a short ways, bumping her head on a section of wall panel, which immediately popped open to reveal a journal hidden inside, this time, according to the nameplate, belonging to Frances Doyle. Violet also recognized her cousin's handwriting, though she didn't particularly read any of the entries. In knowing that the journals were all to go to Vini, she didn't feel it would be right to do so.

Giving the book to Vini when she was at the mansion on Sunday afternoon to work for a couple of hours and then do research, Violet said, "I only read the name in the front, I promise."

"I don't think Mrs. Doyle would have minded you reading her journals, since you were her family," Vini responded, "but thank you for the consideration."

The hidden journal appeared to be more recent than any of the others on the shelf in the downstairs library. Not only was the book the exact same style as the box of blank journals that had been found in the library and that Vini was now using; but also, the dated entries indicated

most of the notes had been recorded in the year leading up to Mrs. Doyle's death.

In reading through the journal at home, Vini discovered that it contained fewer research notes than Mrs. Doyle normally entered, but many more of her personal thoughts and observations. One lengthy note in particular was quite a revelation to Vini.

“Vini is for sure the girl I met when I was 13. I'm going to hide this journal separate from the others because I'm afraid she might find it too early, if she finds the larger library sooner rather than later. She's probably already learned that unicorns are connected to time travel because of the faster-than-the-speed-of-light thing; I read that in a book once myself. She probably figured that out on her own, being a pretty smart kid. But I'm afraid that if she knows from reading this that she is destined to go back in time to meet me, for whatever reason (probably related to what happened in the field when I fell and we saw the bright light), it might influence what she does. Unless I'm supposed to let her know that this is what she's supposed to do. But I think I'd rather be safe than sorry. I've prayed about it, and I believe God is telling me that He will lead her into the past and that my journal notes shouldn't be the catalyst. I think this is right because, if she knows ahead of time, she might change what she says or does and the result would be different. If she hadn't come to the 50's and if she hadn't said the things to me that she did, I might not have thought more highly of Gerard, and probably wouldn't have ended up marrying him. I might not have started praying and reading the bible more either, which is how I learned to roar. Also, God might not have given me Zapor and Folto. And I probably wouldn't have done the stuff with the bus boycott. And I probably wouldn't have started with the unicorn research and might not have amassed the books that have helped her find unicorns. If I guide her to go into the past, she might go too early, or too late. No, I will let God lead her. He's in charge of all of this, not me. His will, not mine. His way, not mine.”

A few pages later, Vini found another entry pertaining to her traveling back in time.

“To Lavinia ‘Marie’ Aberdeen:

If you find and read this before going back in time to visit me at age 13, be sure to pray to God for His guidance. (Actually, pray for His guidance anyway, all of the time. That’s the best policy.) But specifically relating to going back in time for whatever reason you might need to do so, pray that what you read here won’t adversely influence anything that is supposed to happen. Ask God to help you act in accordance with His will and plan. Ask this; then trust Him. Trusting in God is the key to everything. And I hope by now you have figured out the secrets of a certain ‘actual’ key, one I gave you. How silly I am! Of course you have figured that out by now. You have always been good (much better than most people, including myself) at using your brain more, and using more of your brain, the part where unicorns might be hiding, maybe? If you had been my mother’s daughter, she would have been so proud of you. And by the way, I took good care of the thimble you were admiring. For some reason I got the idea (oddly enough when almost choking on a watermelon seed) that the thimble might be extremely important. So I kept it safe and it’s in my sewing basket upstairs. Now, you be sure to keep it safe too, because I’m almost sure it is very important.”

One of the very last entries in the book was even more of a revelation to Vini.

“While Zapor and Folto aren’t yet all that thrilled with their new assignments, God has told me the kids they are protecting are very important to the future, a sister and brother living with their crazy old great-aunt at some huge manor house about fifty miles from here. The kids’ parents are evidently dead; seems like the deaths occurred by normal means rather than demons, but, who knows. Anyway, I’m sure my old friends will settle in eventually; they’ll have to, no choice. We have to obey God’s commands, each and every one of us.”

No wonder the gryphons have been hanging around the mansion, Vini thought. They are attached to Em and Kip. As sure as she was of this, Vini was also sure that Em and Kip weren’t yet aware of the gryphons, likely because God felt they weren’t quite ready for that yet.

God probably brought the family to the mansion to help protect them, Vini also reasoned. With Tulko and the firebirds frequently around, and Lyydu on occasion too, they would likely be safer living here than at their aunt's house.

In truth, Zapor and Folto, assigned to Em and Kip for the last year of Mrs. Doyle's life, were settling in to their new assignments a little better recently. And while both had been somewhat upset that they hadn't been around to protect their former charge from Kugari, they understood that God's ways are often mysterious. And they would never question why because they knew there must have been some good reason God had allowed the demon to throw her from the widow's walk.

On the next weekend, Vini was only working a couple of hours on Saturday morning, because she was going shopping and to a movie in the afternoon with a couple of friends from water polo. One of the girls had just gotten her driver's license, and was anxious to take her friends somewhere. Charlie arrived at the mansion to use the kitchen, just as Vini was leaving.

As she was heading to the side gate, Vini noticed a dove standing on the edge of the second tier of the fountain and turning around to dip its tail into the water. Since the bird was a deep burnt orange color with a metallic sheen, Vini was fairly certain it was a dragon, and one likely staying nearby, since the burnished doves like to conserve energy by not flying too much. She was correct; this was a dragon, and one staying somewhat close, close for a dragon anyway, in a cave about forty miles from the mansion. Passing fairly close to the fountain, Vini noticed tiny flecks of yellow and red colors mixed with the overall canvas of burnt orange feathers. *Well it makes sense, she thought, since the colors of a rainbow would blend together.*

Lyydu happened to be in the garden, with Boomer, who was currently racing around with Pizzo and Heike. Approaching the thunderbird to softly stroke his wing feathers, Vini enjoyed a small moment with Lyydu during which she sent out a thought to him. *I met you once, when you were a much smaller thunderbird.*

Almost immediately, at the same instant she felt something like a small rumble of thunder in her torso, Lyydu's soft reply came into her mind. *I remember.*

Passing Mr. Galloway's house a couple of minutes later, she found him marveling over his yew, the one that had been vandalized, because it had grown nearly three feet since being damaged. "It must be magical," he said, "because yews don't generally grow that fast. If it keeps this up, in a couple of years, it will be taller than any yew ever grew."

In the evening, Ben sat on his bed, reflecting on something he hadn't told anyone about yet, which involved having had a brief glimpse of heaven during the time he was dead. While it had seemed clear at the time, in trying to recall it, the memory of what he had seen was somewhat distant and foggy, as though it might be a very old memory that was trying to come into focus, but that he couldn't quite pull into focus.

He definitely knew no one in heaven was famous, or rich. (Or maybe everyone was.) All were equal, and very large, or seemingly so, as the figures he could see seemed to tower over him. And the setting was so beautiful that he could barely breathe at first. Hillside with lovely flowers, lush trees, and cascading waterfalls were everywhere, as well as sprawling gardens filled with plants and creatures Ben had never seen before, and could scarcely imagine. He definitely remembered a tall gate that reminded him of an enormous opal, polished and creamy, but with all kinds of fiery colors swimming around in it as it caught the light, which was so bright, he almost felt the need to shield his eyes; except that he couldn't help but keep looking. Maybe the gate was picking up the colors from the peacocks nearby, or the fabulous rainbow in the sky. While his brain hadn't necessarily thought of houses, or homes, there were definitely structures there, huge ones; but maybe not huge really, given the setting, just much bigger than anything he might expect to see as residences on earth. Walking along what seemed to be a main street paved with softly-glowing golden stones, Ben had suddenly been pulled back to the garden at Doyle Mansion. In first seeing a peacock looking down upon him, he thought he might have slipped on the golden street. But then Charlie, Vini, and Sam came into view, as well as an absolutely enormous green dragon that Ben, at the time, feared might decide to devour them all. He could feel Jelzey nearby, and her presence served to calm him.

In thinking about Sam being possessed, Ben figured it was all part of God's will. God had allowed it for some very good reasons. For one, to let them all know that it's possible for human beings to be occupied and possessed. For another, they learned that dragons are healers, to the point of even being able to bring the dead back to life.

At the same time Ben was thinking about this, Vini was pondering something as well. She still couldn't figure out why the demon hadn't found some way to kill Ben before, and Sam, and their uncle. The answer came to her a short while later when she was brushing her teeth, and it was something she already knew from her research. The reason he didn't just go on a murderous rampage and kill them all is because demons have to be careful not to let too many people become aware of their existence. They seldom killed in an outright manner, choosing instead to make human deaths look like accidents, suicides, or murders for which innocent people would be blamed. In this case, if the dragon hadn't been able to bring Ben back to life, Sam would have been blamed for his brother's murder. Suddenly thinking of Cain and Abel, Vini felt a chill run up her spine.

The demon that had possessed Sam was called Moru, who, like Kugari, was under Ureg's command and part of the mission to stop Vini's quest for things like unicorns and dragons. However, the plan ended up having an opposite effect; and to her mind this was thanks to the intricate workings of the Clock of the Universe, designed by God, according to His overall plan.

At the mansion next on Wednesday afternoon to trade out a couple of books, Vini was greeted by a nice surprise. Violet had bought a huge metal cabinet and an extremely sturdy combination lock for it so that Vini might have a place to store things that were exclusively hers like Mrs. Doyle's journals.

"I thought the combination lock would be best," Violet said, "so that you wouldn't have to carry an extra key. You set the combination yourself," she added, handing Vini the written instructions.

"This is so thoughtful of you; thank you," Vini said, giving Violet a hug. And it was a relief to her to know that the journals were not only in a locked library but also in a locked cabinet as well. With there being so many of them, she would likely need to leave them at the mansion for a very long time, at least until she had a home of her own someday,

with secure places to store things. And since she had lifetime access to all of the books, with Violet and Dave unlikely to sell the house and move the books elsewhere, Vini thought the subbasement might always be the best place for the journals to stay.

“I know you are working on some pretty spectacular things,” Violet said, “and there’s no limit as to what you might do if you have the resources. I want to make sure nothing hinders you. If you ever need anything, even money, just ask.”

“Thanks, but I think I’m going to be okay,” Vini replied. In addition to the annuity fund Mrs. Doyle had set up for her, both Vini and her parents were saving for college. Plus, Vini was planning to continue working while going to college.

“I know you have a bright future,” Violet went on. “But keep it in mind. Cousin Frances left us pretty well set, and I think it’s important to do good things with the money. I think it’s what she would have wanted.”

Also on Wednesday afternoon, Ben was in his bedroom gathering another set of clothes to take to the mansion to store in the shed to replace the bloody ones Vini had thrown away. He had just stuffed a t-shirt into the pillowcase he had previously kept the zippered bible in. After adding a baseball cap, because he sometimes liked to wear one at work on sunny days, he went to the laundry room to retrieve an old pair of jeans. Returning to his room, he discovered that the t-shirt and cap inside the pillowcase had both disappeared. Since Sam and their uncle were not at home, he couldn’t imagine what might have happened to them. Suddenly getting an eerie feeling, he eyed the pillowcase somewhat warily. Getting three paperclips from his desk, he dropped them into the case where they immediately vanished, fairly severely startling him, even though he had somewhat expected this might happen.

Again eyeing the pillowcase, Ben started thinking. Since the bible hadn’t disappeared when inside, maybe the case had started off perfectly ordinary, then the bible turned it magical from having been inside. Vini seemed to think that her zippered bible was a pretty special bible, so it would make sense for it to be able to perform a trick like making a regular pillow case into a magical one.

Ben had always been fond of magic tricks. Smiling, he dropped in two dimes next. One disappeared, the other did not. Fishing out the one that hadn't vanished, he discovered a small single-blade pocketknife also in the bottom of the case.

So it doesn't just take things, he thought, it gives things too. And how handy; he had wanted a new pocketknife.

Having not attended the teatime to hear Professor Fulhausen, and because Sam hadn't shared many details about the party with him, Ben didn't know anything about bagicals.

Reminiscing, because the pillowcase was an old one that, according to his uncle, had been with his mother's belongings, he stroked the soft flannel. While old, it was still in very good shape, not threadbare and not even much faded, though the cinnamon color had always been fairly pale.

They didn't have the rest of the sheet set anymore because it had gotten very well worn, being used so many years on the boys' beds, and had then been donated to a thrift store. However, this had been the spare pillowcase; and since it was something small connected to his mother, Ben, always a little more sentimental than his brother, had wanted to keep it.

As he thought about dropping a pencil inside, he suddenly felt the need to be very careful about the pillowcase, and stop putting things in, at least for now. It was almost as though a caution light was flashing in his brain and lighting up a thought. *Put it away and try not to think about it.* Deciding to heed the caution, after carefully folding the case, he stowed it in the very bottom of his t-shirt drawer.

On Wednesday evening, Charlie saw a very disturbing vision in her bedroom mirror, which was that of a unicorn, trapped somewhere (imprisoned actually) and starving. But despite being upsetting, there was still hope in that place, strong hope that she could somehow sense.

That same night, in a dream, Vini had a premonition of the birth of someone in the future who would be able to overproduce human goodness, and in such quantities as to be able to feed vast numbers of magical creatures. In her dream, unicorns were celebrating with angels. A peacock was there as well, with many doves, all different colors. Evidently, the peacock had been making more burnished doves, many more of them. While she couldn't tell how far into the future this might

happen, Vini somehow felt it was on the near horizon. As she continued to watch, the peacock began polishing up several of the doves he had just created, with a soft cloth, getting them ready to be sent out into the world. The brisk polishing reminded Vini of someone drying a dog with a towel after a bath.

The dream next shifted to something that was almost funny. The peacock, taking a break from the doves, was visiting Vini who was sitting at the dressing table in her bedroom and getting ready to go somewhere. The funny part involved the peacock polishing her up with a soft cloth, currently working a stubborn spot on one shoulder.

This was the same talking peacock from her previous dream. “We must get you shined up real good,” he said.

Vini knew this to be true because she was going to an important appointment. She just wasn’t sure where the appointment was or what it might be for. Consulting the watch pinned to her chest, she told the bird, “Well, I need to get going.”

With one final swipe of the cloth, the peacock said, “There, all ready to go.”

She then walked outside and headed down the street, as though she might be going to work. But as she was just approaching the near edge of Mr. Galloway’s estate, through the many tree limbs crisscrossing the road, she noticed that the very end of Paloma Drive, ahead of her in the distance, looked very strange. As she got just a little closer, she could see exactly why because sitting at the dead end of the street and facing the road was an enormous clock, easily larger than Doyle Mansion. Since Paloma Drive didn’t normally dead end, but hooked a little to become Ibis Avenue, this was very strange indeed.

Reaching the clock, Vini sat on a bench in a grassy area in front of it as though waiting for her appointment to begin. Her journal in her lap, waiting patiently, she studied the clock towering over her. The various parts seemed to be made of many types of metal, wood, stone, and jewels, though her mind couldn’t quite reckon that any part was particularly mahogany, or granite, or emerald, or platinum because everything looked odd to her, almost otherworldly, as though the clock’s true home might actually be on a distant heavenly body somewhere, and everything used to make it had come from that strange planet, or one of its many moons. The face was circular, with many

more numbers than just twelve that were expressed in a type of numerals other than Arabic and Roman, which were the only two types Vini was familiar with. Several rings surrounding the main numbers contained a lot of other markings, some scrolling and squiggly, others with more straight and square lines; but all looking very intricate to Vini's eyes, and she imagined a lot of importance in the meaning of each of the symbols. The gears and cogs and such inside, being many more than the workings of any normal clock and almost too numerous to imagine, were of both massive and tiny varieties, with a few in-betweens thrown in. Numerous other mechanisms, some delicate looking, others more sturdy, adorned various outer parts of the clock; and Vini couldn't even begin to fathom what functions they all might serve.

As she was taking it all in, a small dove flew in to land on a platform inside the clock. Quickly shapeshifting into a plum-purple dragon marked with flecks of red as well as a few blue streaks on his back, the dragon carefully squeezed in between a couple of the larger gears to swiftly make a few adjustments to the clock's workings. From what she was able to see, he appeared to be soldering something with the tip of one claw. Next, wrapping his tail around a massive spring, he gave it a squeeze as if tightening it.

When finished with his task, the dragon gave Vini a small nod before shrinking back to dove form and flying off to a nearby cave to have a good long nap with a group of bats and a couple of grimmpts, who also liked to hang out in caves on occasion it seemed.

Without particularly thinking, Vini found herself taking a few notes in her journal.

“The burnished doves make various repairs to the Clock of the Universe to keep past, present, and future events on God's timing, preventing certain things from happening more quickly than they should, and hastening others, according to His overall plan. Dragons also occasionally solder up rips in our realm, healing breaches, sometimes closing off Demon Pockets, other times keeping hellfire from brimming over. This is part of their healing powers, along with healing human beings of various injuries and illnesses, occasionally also raising the dead, if this is part of God's will.”

This particular clock, of course, didn't have anything to do with telling time; however, the minor repair did have a little something to do with Etowa and Boko each making a move in their game, one in the near future, and the other a couple of generations into the future. While their game moves were seldom sequential as far as how human beings view time, because the pair never bothered looking at calendars, if humans were watching the game, they would notice one move taking place at a manor house in less than a year's time, and the other move happening on a mountain not quite fifty years into the future.

Vini was just thinking of heading for home when a unicorn appeared, standing on a ledge right below the face of the clock. As she watched, fascinated, the creature used its horn to wind the clock, before vanishing immediately after the last turn.

Wise enough to know that she herself was connected to this clock in some cosmic way, as all human beings are, contemplating, Vini took the winding of the clock to mean that she was gearing up or getting ready for something, something incredibly important that was about to start.

Again making a note before starting for home, Vini wrote something very similar to an entry she had read in one of Mrs. Doyle's journals when first beginning her search for dragons.

“The horn of the unicorn is a key that winds the Clock of the Universe; and dragons maintain the clock, keeping it in good repair, while waiting for the Endtimes when they will act as helpers to God in remaking the earth with their fire.”



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