

Wind Horses and Horned Lions



J.H. Sweet

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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

The Legend of the Sand Dollar
By Anonymous

There's a pretty little legend
That I would like to tell
Of the birth and death of Jesus
Found in this lowly shell.

If you examine closely,
You'll see that you find here
Four nail holes and a fifth one
Made by a Roman's spear.

On one side the Easter lily,
Its center is the star
That appeared unto the shepherds
And led them from afar.

The Christmas poinsettia,
Etched on the other side
Reminds us of His birthday,
Our happy Christmastide.

Now break the center open,
And here you will release
The five white doves awaiting
To spread good will and peace.

This simple little symbol,
Christ left for you and me
To help us spread His Gospel
Through all eternity.



*Good tends to be quiet, but there are times
when it can and must roar...*

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Chapter One

Rooftop Rampage

Vini Aberdeen's wind horse set her down on the flattest part of the roof of the mansion. Not that there was much flatness, given the style of the house, with its many pointy turrets and the steep slope in general over the roomy attic spaces; but the valleys between the slopes provided a safe enough area for her to begin making her way to the steel fire ladder leading down to the third-floor sewing room. As Tulko loped away into the sky, his hooves flashing brilliant copper, the sunshine filtering through the shimmering colors trailing behind him bathed the rooftop in softened shades of magenta, amber, and turquoise. Though Vini had seen her friend take flight many times, she still marveled at how easily he was able to do so without having wings.

Despite a gust of wind in wake from the horse's departure, with her footing fairly secure, Vini little expected the danger awaiting her behind the wide stone chimney stack in her path. Nor had Tulko sensed anything, which was unusual for him, especially for as close as he had gotten to the concealed spectral beast before soaring away toward his herd in the clouds. And he wouldn't know that Vini needed him, desperately, until a short while later, as he was taking a good long drink from one of his favorite cloud ponds after frolicking in a much distant tornado with a couple of his friends for nearly five minutes.

Vini would later discover that the owner of the mansion, Mrs. Doyle, had called a chimneysweep who, in his efforts to unstick the jammed parlor flue, had awakened the demon that had long slept up the parlor chimney. Not that Mr. Van Smelt would remember anything about the event, having been immediately knocked unconscious (a state in which he would remain for over an hour) by the force of energy exploding into the room from the fireplace.

Being somewhat sleepy and confused, the demon hadn't stayed long in the parlor. Indeed, quickly retreating to the fireplace to slip back into the chimney, he hadn't even glimpsed Mrs. Doyle rushing into the room

to investigate the noise and tend to Mr. Van Smelt. A few moments later, after waking properly, the evil spirit chose the direction of up, instead of down, making his way out onto the roof where he cowered behind the chimney stack to gauge his surroundings and await instructions. Occasionally, sleeping demons were awakened by their Master, none other than Satan himself, for the purpose of performing specific tasks at his bidding; but more often, demons such as the one in the chimney were awakened by higher ranking demons who were seeking out sleeping subordinates in order to rouse them for service in carrying out some or another evil plan. Upon spotting Tulko setting Vini down and leaving, the demon basically began licking his chops in anticipation of the ease at which he would dispatch this particular one of God's children. Quickly realizing that he hadn't been wakened by either his Master or any other superior, but by accident, the demon wouldn't be waiting for instructions; he would instead simply act, committing as many evil deeds as he saw fit, before choosing another quiet place in which to again wait and rest until summoned.

The easy manner in which the evil servant anticipated killing Vini would begin with an initial blast of force, very similar to the short burst of wind Tulko had left behind. However, also using the small part of his being that was corporeal, the demon would add a small shove, to make sure that the girl would sail well clear of the roof, and miss any chance of grabbing onto any of the many oak branches basically hugging that side of the house. Her death, of course, would seem like an ordinary accident, or possibly suicide, which would well please the demon, as he knew his Master particularly delighted in the act of suicide, and often took a great deal of satisfaction in knowing that his influence was largely the cause of the despair and impulsiveness that were factors in many of these cases. Confident that this would be an extremely easy task, the demon smiled smugly as he thought, *This kill will be a good warm-up exercise, after such a long sleep.*

What the chimney demon didn't know, in all his smugness, was that Vini had encountered demons before, and basically could handle herself in dangerous situations such as this. He also didn't know that the inhabitants of the house weren't helpless either against his particular brand of evil.

Though startled, Vini reacted quickly as the demon swiftly advanced, with his palms raised not only to emit his initial energy burst, but also in anticipation of the intended shove. Ducking swiftly allowed her to miss most of the forceful energy current projected at her. Next, throwing her heavy backpack hard at the demon—who had slightly slowed his stride toward her, mainly because he hadn't yet worked out the stiffness in his limbs after being cramped so long in the chimney—Vini was able to knock him to his knees.

Drawing her long dagger, Vini stood her ground, as the demon slowly rose to stand towering over her, at nearly nine feet in height. Were he to raise his wings, currently tightly folded against his body, also in need of stretching out like his limbs, he would have reached twelve feet.

The demon hadn't noticed the dagger before now. If he had, he would have been more cautious, particularly because it looked fairly old. Modern weapons like guns generally couldn't do much against demons, who weren't made of much earthly matter; but something about ancient metals actually could harm the nasty creatures, despite their lack of material bodily substance. These ancient weapons were often effective not only because they had been forged specifically for combating spectral evil, but also because many of these instruments had been blessed by the Holy men and women of the time, people with whom God walked very closely. God, of course, could dispatch a demon by a simple thought, or, if feeling playful, by half a blink of an eye. However, as in Vini's case, He often chose to allow His children to take care of these matters themselves.

Now more wary of the girl, the demon chalked up not noticing how his foe was armed to the fact that he was still not yet fully alert after his long time asleep. However, in recognizing that this was not going to be such an easy target after all, the demon didn't despair; instead, he simply let out a war cry, in order to call other demons to him for assistance.

Vini's human ears definitely felt something, but she didn't particularly hear the cry because it was something similar to the high-pitched whistles or sirens that basically only creatures like dogs with their super-sensitive ears could hear. And the cry did in fact reach all dogs in the neighborhood, setting them off in a frenzy of howling.

A Saint Bernard in particular, named Sugar Bear, who had encountered demons before, worked himself up to such a state of panic over the war cry that he broke through a weak portion of his fence and raced toward the mansion, intending to do whatever he could to help anyone who might be in danger from the disgusting beast. He was able to enter the fenced mansion property through the back gate because the gardener, a teenage boy named Sam Dellinger, who was tending to a flower garden on the back lawns, had left it open while retrieving a wheelbarrow of topsoil from a pile at the far back of the estate, just outside the gate. However, Sugar Bear, though his intentions were good, wouldn't be able to do much initially, other than lunge and bark from below since he couldn't climb to the rooftop to help Vini battle the evil creature.

Fortunately, another creature had also heard the demon's cry, one that liked to hang out in the mansion's music room, most often at various places on the bookshelves and in an old oversized coffee cup currently holding an array of artist's paint brushes. Although it might have seemed impossible for such a tiny creature to do much good in a battle such as this, Pizzo, the mansion's resident puck troll, had also encountered demons before. And he wasn't about to let this one (or any of his evil friends) disturb the ordinarily peaceful state of his home. Being wakened from a nap by the horrible cry, he didn't even need to see what was on the roof to know that he needed to act, and quickly, to summon help. Slapping his ruddy pink cheeks with his pudgy hands several times to wake up properly, he slipped on his little shoes and crept out from behind the green velvet throw pillow on the divan, one of his many comfy and favored napping places. Sliding down the leg of the divan, he scuttled across the floor to a specific spot along the baseboards where he pushed on a piece of wood trim, hinged on the inside to act as a door, to enter a puck-sized secret tunnel in the wall. Taking two left turns and one right in his sprint through the tunnel, Pizzo next slid down a long water pipe to the basement to enter an underground tunnel in the garden. Only taking one turn this time, where the tunnel met a buried boulder that needed to be skirted, the puck troll swiftly made his way beneath the front lawns and under the street, and under the sidewalk on the other side of the street, to eventually surface from a secret puck door in Mr. Galloway's side

garden, directly beneath the gazebo. In addition to being situated well under the gazebo, the door was further concealed by an old upturned clay flowerpot, which Pizzo flipped to one side in his hurry to exit the tunnel and reach the garden.

Pausing only ever so slightly to lean against a stout gladiola stem to catch his breath after the near marathon he had just run (by puck-troll standards), Pizzo straightened himself up and began to work. Facing one of Mr. Galloway's groupings of creature-shaped topiaries, the tiny troll began grunting and making faces while pointing to each shrub in the cluster individually, as though counting. But, of course, Pizzo wasn't counting; he was commanding. And the shrubs were responding, by coming to life in a colorful swirl of light sparkles, as though thousands of tiny particles of glittering party confetti (that might have been likened to the lights of fairy-blown kisses) were caught up in a gentle twirling breeze. Though this was hard work for the little troll, whose cheeks were glowing like bright cherries from the exertion, the results were very satisfying.

With his first group of friends fully awakened, Pizzo swiftly moved on to the second, throwing squeaky commands (that sounded like a series of musical chirps and whistles) over his shoulder as he headed off toward the back gardens.

After more grunting, face making, and finger pointing—to bring the next group of topiaries to life in a similarly-colorful twinkling light swirl—the puck troll gave another series of chirp-and-whistle commands before quickly retracing his steps around the corner of the house and under the gazebo in order to return by tunnel to the mansion. Although confident that help was on the way, in the form of a small army of topiaries crossing the street and scaling the fence surrounding the mansion, Pizzo didn't slow his stride because he needed to awaken more help, this time in the attic of the mansion. From the basement, the puck troll started to climb—up pipes, wiring, and stud walls—weaving a path to the attic not only that he alone was privy to, but also one only he (and possibly a few mice) could have fit through.

Completely out of breath by the time he reached the attic, he paused only briefly to lean against an old sailor's trunk before dragging the dust covers off of about a dozen large paintings leaning here and there against the attic walls and low rafters. This time, the magical process to

awaken help took slightly longer, mainly because paint-and-canvas creations contained a different kind of life, in more of a dormant state, than the leaves, branches, trunks, and roots of sculpted shrubberies. However, despite the process taking longer, with deeper grunts and more grotesque facial expressions, the whole attic was sparkling and shimmering with swirling colorful lights in short order as the subjects of the paintings came to life.

At this point, as the attic became alive with movement, Pizzo did stop to rest, not by desire, but out of necessity, having completely spent all of his breakfast energy, along with the shortly-before-midnight snack, dinner, and lunch energies from the previous day. Upon catching his breath, he retrieved two shelled salted peanuts and a honey-roasted cashew from his jacket pockets, and gave them a good gnaw in order to regain a bit of energy for a quick trip down to the music room to perform one final task before guiding his attic friends into battle. Good thing he was wearing comfortable shoes, or he never would have been able to manage all the running around.

Meanwhile, on the roof, while waiting for more demons to arrive, the chimney demon was grabbing old shake shingles, from several piles left over from the reroofing two years before, and was throwing them at Vini. Though the shakes weren't all that heavy, thrown with extreme force, they did sting, bruise, scrape, and sink splinters wherever they found their mark. The demon had also torn off a long piece of copper flashing from the base of the chimney, which he twisted into a kind of makeshift lance that could also easily act as a sword, for as sharp as it was along the edges. Advancing on Vini after fashioning his weapon, and with several slashes at her, he managed to knock the dagger from her hand. Scuttling backwards as best she could over the rises and falls of the steep roof, Vini threw loose shingles back at the demon, to try to slow his advance.

She was trying to think, while also trying not to panic. In her current position on the roof, she was not very near the down ladder she had been trying to reach. And not only was there no good place to hide or seek protection on the rooftop, Vini was still in a slight state of shock over the unexpected encounter, which made it difficult to think and easier to panic. Picking up speed as she headed for a turret—where she planned to grab onto some of the gingerbread trim, in the hopes that it

would be sturdy enough to support her weight long enough for her to swing down onto a balcony—Vini, unfortunately, didn't notice another pile of loose shingles until she tripped over them.

As her feet began to slip, grappling for the support of an iron weathervane featuring a running horse, Vini vaguely wondered if she could leap from the roof and catch a branch of the old oak in the side yard. Unfortunately, from her current position, she would have had to have been a bona fide superhero (or at least a circus acrobat) to have managed it.

Also unfortunately, she wouldn't be moving much at all for the time being because, in answer to the war cry, another demon had arrived, dropping to the roof from a hovering low dark cloud that seemed to appear from out of nowhere above the mansion. With this new arrival effectively blocking her path to the turret, Vini would now need to rethink her strategy of escape.

Fortunately, the chimney demon was currently distracted in noticing Sam who, having heard the ruckus on the roof, had stopped gardening and had started scaling the side of the mansion using gutters, window trim, siding overlaps, and other such handholds and footholds.

Backing away from the demon that had just landed, Vini quickly retraced her steps, not only to put distance between herself and danger, but also in search of the dagger. Unable to find it, she did manage to grab up her backpack, which she nearly tripped over.

Still somewhat in shock over the attack, Vini wasn't sure what to do. The morning had begun so quietly, with Vini and Tulko traveling to Japan just as dawn was breaking. Their trip had been successful, with Vini picking up two objects, one of which she felt sure was connected to her quest to find a unicorn. Returning less than two hours after departing, she was looking forward, on this first Saturday morning of spring break, to studying the find more closely.

Hoisting himself over the railing of the third-floor balcony, very near the fire ladder outside the sewing room, Sam had nearly reached the roof. However, the chimney demon had been keeping close watch on him, and had been throwing shingles at him. Now, as Sam actually started to climb the ladder, the demon began jabbing at him with the makeshift lance.

Fearful that her friend might be either stabbed or knocked from the roof, Vini wanted to help Sam; but she also needed to keep an eye on the second demon, who was sizing up the scene as he slowly advanced towards her. Vini had finally managed to see where her dagger had been thrown; unfortunately, it lay on the other side of the chimney, out of reach. Scrambling in her backpack, her hand met a large glass bottle that she had picked up along the beach in Japan. Though it wasn't the particular item she had been searching for, she had brought it back because it contained a rolled-up paper. Having never before found a message in a bottle, Vini was very excited about the discovery. Because the bottle was wax sealed and she wanted to be careful in opening it, she hadn't yet read the message. Not wanting to dismiss the possibility that it might be important, she didn't want to risk breaking the bottle or losing the message; but with Sam in danger and the second demon almost upon her, the current situation was desperate. After only the smallest of delays, in an effort to help Sam, she hurled the bottle as hard as she could at the chimney demon who howled in pain and anger as the heavy bottle not only hit him, but basically stuck in the back of his head. Never having been much good at sports like softball or dodgeball, Vini was a little surprised to discover that she had such a good throwing arm.

While the bottle-stuck-in-the-head likely would have killed a human, it did little to harm the demon. However, it did temporarily distract him from his assault on Sam. Wailing and writhing, the nasty creature grappled with the bottle, finally managing to pull it out of his head, where he threw it to one side. In his frantic state, he had also flung aside his makeshift lance, which Vini retrieved; too late, as it turns out, because the second demon, who had just reached her position, had managed to fashion a weapon of his own out of a piece of valley metal ripped from the roof. Folded in half, the metal formed something like a heavy club, which the demon swung full at Vini like a baseball bat. The valley metal, thankfully, was not as sharp as the copper flashing and basically hit her broadside. However, though she wasn't cut, she was knocked completely off her feet, so hard that she sailed about six feet before landing. Since this had taken her completely by surprise, Vini hadn't been able to react fast enough to counter the swing using the copper lance, which flew from her hands as she fell.

Fortunately, at this exact moment, when her need was most desperate, Tulko charged back in to help, putting himself between Vini and the second demon who, wary of a tangle with a wind horse (as any creature would be), backed off slightly.

Sam had finally managed to reach the roof and was swiping at the chimney demon with a shovel he had brought with him—the only thing handy when he noticed what was happening on the roof. The shovel, fortunately, had a leather string attached for hanging, which Sam had been able to fit to his shoulder. Though it had been difficult to climb with the shovel, he was happy to have it because, while the demon was leaning forward, holding his head in pain, Sam was able to give the already-sore head a terrific smack with the broad end of the shovel, which succeeded in knocking the demon flat, for a few moments at least, and knocking him in the direction opposite the position of the copper lance.

Though Vini had gotten the wind knocked out of her, she was still able to fight and, thanks to Tulko blocking the second demon, was able to finally retrieve her dagger. Not that the weapon would end up doing her much good against the three additional demons that had just arrived, two having flown in, the other seemingly dropping from another low cloud in the sky. On their way in, the new arrivals had broken heavy branches from nearby trees and were now wielding them as clubs. In an effort to overpower the wind horse and advance, they also made use of what was available on the rooftop, quickly turning the scene into a frenzy of flying shakes, pieces of wood trim, and bits of metal.

Although able to slow the demons and keep their hurled objects and clubs in check with the power of his wind, Tulko was unable to completely stop their advances because he had to be careful not to knock Vini off the roof, which he easily might have if he had increased the intensity of the gusts he was giving off by mere snorts of breath from his nostrils. Unfortunately, the extra demons were now blocking him from scooping Vini up and flying off with her, which had been his original intention when he landed. He couldn't reach Sam either to be able to help him. A short time before, as he was drinking from the cloud pond, Tulko had sensed the disturbance, and had then listened for Vini's thoughts which, though muddled, clearly indicated her distress and fear. Being too far from his herd to call them, he had simply dashed

to help. Though nearly a hundred miles away, the horse had reached the mansion in less than six seconds.

Tulko was doing his best to protect Vini with as much force as he dared; but the demons, of course, had powers similar to that of the wind horse, specifically, the ability to produce gusty energy bursts, which they began doing against both the horse and the humans. With so many on their side, the demons would soon overpower Tulko; and the horse knew this. But he couldn't increase his assault to counter the attack because he feared the force of it might well tear Vini and Sam to pieces. They were in enough danger already without a well-meaning protector accidentally killing them.

Sam's shovel assault had caused the chimney demon to back off; however, his head no longer hurting as much, and now in near full possession of his faculties, the evil creature began creating a windy brawl of his own, which raced across the roof in zigzags, much like a confused mini-tornado, adding intensity to the ferocious energy eruptions the other demons were producing with what appeared to be simply short swipes of their gnarled and clawed hands.

With this added turmoil, and within seconds it seemed, the roof was turned into an even wilder scene of flying debris that, in addition to the swirling bits of wood and metal, now also included branches ripped from nearby trees, one of which hit Vini in the head causing her to lurch sideways where she knocked the other side of her head hard against the chimney stack.

The double whammy to her head proved too much for her, and she fell, hard. Dizzy and disoriented, she wouldn't be rising again anytime soon. She had also lost her dagger when she fell; and with her head throbbing and blurry eyes, she was unable to locate it. She did, however, manage to spot the copper lance nearby, which she crawled to. Unfortunately, feeling nauseas as though extremely carsick, and incredibly weak, she found the task of picking it up too difficult. After struggling with the heavy weapon for a few moments, frustrated, and losing what was left of her focus, she crawled away from the sword and, unfortunately, her dagger as well, which, though it lay only a few feet from her knee, she didn't notice.

As another demon flew in, absolutely huge with wings spanning thirteen feet at least, four smaller ones seemed to materialize out of nowhere on top of one of the larger turrets.

Crawling on hands and knees, Vini collapsed onto her side as she once again reached the chimney, which she had planned to lean against for support and protection while trying to get her bearings. However, since she wasn't simply foggy and disoriented, but completely lacking in energy as well, she couldn't manage to pull herself up into a sitting position. In fact, she could barely move at all, not even to lift her head. Rolling onto her back, she simply stared dimly at the chaos taking place above and around her.

Her fatigue wasn't particularly surprising, as she hadn't slept well for the past couple of nights. Add the lack of sleep to the early morning excursion to Japan, plus the hard knocks to both body and head, along with the emotional exertion of intense panic, it was no wonder that she was completely spent.

Though Tulko had continued to try to protect Vini, he knew he was fighting a losing battle. There were simply too many demons, and he needed to get help. However, he couldn't leave her alone. Being nearly in a state of panic himself as to what he should do, he was relieved when the answer to his dilemma appeared in shimmering splendor right in front of him.

Seeing Tulko take flight, in an instantaneous colorful streak into the heavens, Vini vaguely wondered why he was leaving (since it was completely unlike him to back off from a fight), until she saw the firebird. *Of course*, she thought. *If Sam is nearby, Beme is too.*

The firebird hadn't actually been nearby, having been playing in plumes of lava inside of an active volcano on an island in the Pacific Ocean. But Beme was constantly on the alert and, like Tulko, could sense danger to Sam, the human he was charged with protecting.

Though the pain in her head was turning into lightheadedness and she was unable to think clearly, Vini understood that Tulko had left her in Beme's care, and she felt a small measure of relief as the magnificent flaming bird dropped down in front of her.

However, like the wind horse, Beme wouldn't be able to use his full power against the demons, and not even a hundredth of it, for fear of harming Vini and Sam. Noting that the chimney was not a true

protective wall due to what might sneak around it from behind, and setting his hover several feet in front of Vini, Beme reminded himself to keep eyes on what might be approaching from all sides. Squarely facing three demons, who were swiping at him with tree limbs, he easily set the makeshift clubs ablaze with a mere flick of a single blazing tail feather, while raising his position a couple of feet in order to keep eyes on Sam as well.

Inside the house, unable to ignore the racket on the roof any longer, Mrs. Doyle broke off tending to Mr. Van Smelt, still wholly unconscious and with a streaming bloody nose because of the way in which he had fallen, in order to climb her back stairs to the highest attic turret so that she could look out and see what was going on.

Unfortunately, in leaning out of the turret window, she attracted the attention of one of the demons. Unable to close the window quickly enough as the demon flew at her at near torpedo speed, Mrs. Doyle fled down the stairs, not bothering to look back to see the phantasmal creature charging after her, until she reached her library by means of the rear door. Inside the library, she quickly unhooked one of her antique weapons, a headman's axe, from the wall. No stranger to fighting demons herself, the elderly woman was ready as the demon entered the room. Since she was standing behind a table with her arms lowered, the demon, as he approached, couldn't initially see the weapon, and was completely taken off his smug and satisfied guard when she swiftly raised it, dispatching his head with a single neat swipe. Not being made of much earthly substance, just mainly evil energy, the demon instantly dissipated, in something like the explosive puff of a small cloudburst, but a cloud filled with air rather than water, and a foul air at that, which left a gritty and oily film on the library floor and the corner of a throw rug. Fortunately, the rug wasn't an antique, as it was likely going to need to be completely disposed of after this soiling.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Doyle wouldn't be able to stop to count her blessings just yet because another demon had also entered the house via the open turret window, and was swiftly making his way down the back stairs to the open rear door of the library.

Meanwhile, back on the roof, heartened by the arrival of the firebird, Vini tried to rise, but found her limbs still too weak to move. Though her surroundings were mostly a blur, she saw Sam, still armed

only with the shovel, taking on both the chimney demon and a slightly smaller counterpart. She also saw Beme drift slightly towards his charge, intent on helping, which prompted Sam to shout at the firebird to stay put and protect Vini.

At Sam's command, Beme stayed above her, watchful, and pushing as hard as he dared against the three demons trying to get at her. Though the demons were accustomed to fire, they were not a match for the intensity of Beme, which was a different kind of fire than what they were used to, being God created and not summoned by a mere fallen angel.

Entranced by the shimmer of the golden flames above her, as though unable to look away from a captivating desert mirage, Vini wondered where the other firebird was. But after only a moment's thought, she realized that there generally was only one around at a time. Sam definitely had two firebirds connected to him, as protectors, but Vini couldn't remember a time when she had seen both of them at once. When first being introduced to the creatures, and mainly because the birds were so fiery, she hadn't even been able to discern the slight difference in color; but Beme was definitely darker than his sister, Jelzey.

Gazing almost dreamily at the three demons trying to get at her, she nearly laughed because what they were doing resembled an odd kind of dance, first lunging, then leaping back in order to avoid being scalded by the curling and snapping whips of fire Beme was emitting from his long tail feathers. The three-against-one scenario hardly troubled the firebird, who had only to exercise minimal energy to generate the lashes. Nor was it much effort to produce tiny fireballs, which he sent out rapidly from his claws, almost as swiftly as machine-gun fire.

Being so dazed and foggy, and with her subconscious trying to keep her from further panic in the dangerousness of the situation, Vini found herself humored again in thinking, *Who would have thought demons could be such different shapes and sizes?* Indeed, the three trying to get at her were very squat and fat, as compared to the first one that had attacked, and Vini's mind quickly named the dancing demons, *Roly, Poly, and Ugly Beach Ball*.

As far as the first demon, Vini had noticed that, aside from his arms and legs, he was shaped a lot like the square of the chimney stack; and

her brain reasoned that he had likely come out of the chimney. But, of course, as shapeshifters, demons were ever-changing creatures. Being only partly made of some type of earthly material—that material making up only a small percentage of their bodies, with much more of their being consisting of unknown and supernatural components—it was not hard for demons to change shapes and sizes. Nor was it hard when they died for their bodies to simply dematerialize, leaving only grainy residue often resembling greasy highway sludge mixed with the foulest of bird poop.

Vini also reasoned that the demon had likely been in the chimney for many months, possibly years. She had read somewhere that they sometimes go to sleep and just wait, until called into action by their Master. In thinking back, she remembered that this particular chimney had a stuck flue. Mrs. Doyle had said she felt a draft the previous winter, and had tried to close the flue, only to discover that it was already closed, but was jammed to the point that it could neither be opened nor closed more tightly. Vini had tried to force it open in the hopes of readjusting the damper to close it better, but she hadn't been able to get the latch to budge; at which point, Mrs. Doyle said she would get the chimneysweep to look at it the next time he was out, which might not be anytime soon because, with the mild winters in their area, she hardly ever used the fireplaces, and therefore only had a sweep look at them every five years or so. Evidently, the chimney being his chosen sleep spot, the demon had jammed the flue, locking it somehow so as not to be disturbed. However, Mrs. Doyle had continued to feel cold chills when in the parlor, and had decided to call the sweep early, who had then unknowingly awakened the demon. As Tulko was initially landing on the roof, Vini had seen a van near the service entrance in the back of the mansion, and had glimpsed the logo on the side, which was a caricature of Mr. Van Smelt popping out of the top of a chimney. Putting this together with the shape of the demon, it all finally made sense as to how this Saturday morning, that had started out so lovely and peaceful, had turned into such a nightmare.

Fading in and out of consciousness, Vini barely noticed when Mr. Galloway's topiaries arrived, though they would have been hard to miss, as large as they were. The butterfly, owl, and hummingbird had all flown in and were now hovering over the scene. Given the already-

crowded state of the roof, and the fact that they were particularly large shrubs, they were finding it difficult to locate a good spot in which to set down.

Quickly taking note of these new leafy opponents, who were whipping about their evil faces and shoulders in an effort to distract them, the demons began using their windy blasts of energy against the flying shrubs. However, being used to the wind, especially since the region experienced frequent wind storms, the gusts didn't trouble the topiaries much. In fact, wind was actually their friend, being responsible for making the trees, bushes, and plants in the area strong, which is why it still didn't bother them when Tulko and his sister, Dara, charged in.

Mr. Galloway's enormous camel, anteater, moose, tiger, and gorilla topiaries had arrived on the ground. Pizzo hadn't awakened the smaller animals of the garden menagerie, just the larger ones. The twin dolphins had wanted to come, but hadn't been able to, not having enough sculpted sprays of water to carry them across the street and over the mansion lawns. (They would have needed a super-long hedge, shaped like a river and come to life as they had, to accomplish it.)

Two demons on the rooftop, along with three more that had just arrived and were hovering above the mansion, quickly realized that they had new opponents on the ground, and speedily zoomed down to engage them. With their fellow demons already having difficulty battling the horses and firebird, they were particularly intent on keeping these new adversaries from joining the fighting on the roof. Indeed, the gorilla had already started to climb the sturdy trellis outside the kitchen windows and was making good progress; until, that is, two descending demons smashed into him, knocking him off the trellis to the ground, where he hit with a particularly meaty thud. Fortunately, being made of extremely supple branches and bouncy leaves, the fall didn't hurt him, and he was able to rise quickly in order to help his fellow shrubs in battling the newly-arrived opponents.

The ground topiaries had brought some gardening tools with them in the form of a hoe, a pitch fork, a rake, and a pair of hedge shears. Not made of ancient metal, these tools weren't going to be all that effective against the demons; but they were better than nothing, and were a help, especially when wielded with such expert skill. The

topiaries, as it turns out, were extremely coordinated, not to mention graceful and strong, and were more than capable of holding their own against five demons.

The demons on the roof, meanwhile, were severely struggling against the blasts from the rearing and snorting wind horses, and the searing blaze of Beme who, in being careful not to injure Sam and Vini, still couldn't light up as much as he would have liked. He also didn't want to set any of the flying shrubberies on fire, or the roof of the mansion for that matter. But even with Beme's powers subdued, the demons were still incredibly wary of the flaming bird because they knew what he was capable of, which was a much greater power over fire than even their Master's. Indeed, the burning light from a whole pack of fallen angels would have seemed dim in comparison to the light of a creature like a firebird, in full fiery glory, blessed by God, made not only of flame, but also of the light of goodness and pureness.

Despite fearing the firebird, the demons never considered fleeing, mainly because they were now grunting mad about the horses joining the frenzy. Never being fast enough individually to catch a wind horse, nor strong enough to overpower one, now being in a demon pack, they saw a slight opportunity here on the rooftop of besting not one, but two, of the godly creatures.

The chimney demon in particular was filled with rage, and could hardly believe that this whole thing had started when he tried to kill one young girl, a task that should have been incredibly easy had she been as helpless as she appeared. But, of course, she hadn't turned out to be helpless at all. With anger fueling their energy, like the recharging of super-strong batteries, the pack of demons fought extra hard.

Sam, on the other hand, had begun to tire somewhat; and, despite the extra help from the horses and flying topiaries, the chimney demon and his fighting partner finally managed to get the best of him, knocking the shovel from his hand, and giving him a hard shove, which caused him to sail from the roof.

Shrieking in panic, Beme followed Sam's path in a fiery streak, only to discover that Sam had managed to catch an oak limb and was fine. Commanding Beme to return to Vini (which the firebird did somewhat reluctantly since he knew the wind horses could manage things), Sam began to climb down.

All during the battle, Sugar Bear had been watching from below, trying to figure out what to do; and in not being able to figure anything out, he had been mainly barking and running in circles. However, upon noticing the tools the topiaries were using, he had grabbed a bucket half full of water sitting next to a rain barrel, and was now carrying it around by the handle with his strong teeth, though he didn't particularly know what to he might end up doing with it.

Sam, in his haste to reach the ground, slipped and fell the last ten feet from the tree, which knocked the wind out of him. Disoriented, he lay still for a few moments. This finally gave Sugar Bear something to do with his bucket, which was still about a third full of water even with all of the sloshing around the Saint Bernard had done. Setting the bucket down next to Sam's shoulders, Sugar Bear dumped it over onto his head, which served to revive Sam, as did the tugging on his sleeve and licking of his face. With Sugar Bear's assistance, Sam was quickly roused and oriented; and he soon discovered that the fall from the roof was meant to be because he was very near his bow and quiver full of arrows, which were leaned against the bull's-eye target he had set up for archery practice. But before climbing the side of the mansion again, he backed up to a good vantage point in order to fire arrows at several demons that, being positioned very near the edge of the roof, were in his line of sight.

Noticing the archer, one of the demons on the ground came after Sam, only to be tackled by the anteater who, though he lost some of his leaves during the scrapple, was more than a match for the nasty creature.

Meanwhile, Sugar Bear, still trying to be helpful, retrieved two of Sam's arrows for him that, in the gustiness of the setting, had missed their targets, sailing wide of the house.

One might have thought that the neighbors would have been roused by all of the noise and tussle surrounding the mansion. Not so. But this wasn't due to the large size of the estate, which put the house a good distance away from other residences; nor was it due to tall trees obscuring the view, or the fact that there were no other four-story houses (counting the attic spaces) in the neighborhood, giving no one else as good a vantage point for seeing the goings on at the mansion. The lack of notice was more due to the fact that the demons had raised a

veil of storm clouds, reaching around six stories high, around the entire property. Though this curtain of storm had taken them several minutes to produce, and likely wasn't as strong as it might have been had they not been multi-tasking by also engaging in battle, it was nonetheless effective in camouflaging their evil activities, not being particularly of much concern to the neighborhood, as this area of the country frequently experienced sudden and unpredictable weather events like freak wind, lightning, and rain storms that produced things such as large hail and flash flooding.

Back on the roof, her head again throbbing, particularly from the pressure change that had come with the gathering storm clouds, Vini felt very sleepy. Having trouble maintaining consciousness, she barely noticed an arrow whizzing by. Through blurred vision, she did see the firebird, still keeping a line of demons at bay with lashes of fire. And although she couldn't see them, she felt the nearness of Tulko and Dara, which made her feel even more protected.

Sam had started to climb again, with his bow and quiver this time, which were much easier to manage while climbing than the shovel had been. Reaching the roof in less than five minutes, he quickly dispatched two demons standing side by side with one arrow.

Vini thought she was hallucinating when she saw a giant kitten scamper by, hissing, spitting, and scratching at one of the demons. However, a mere moment later, she smiled upon recognizing a second enormous kitten as the subject of one of the paintings done by Mrs. Doyle's grandniece, Louetta Nolan. Pizzo had brought some of Louetta's characters to life once before, as a birthday present for his young artist friend. Artistic creations brought to life by the puck troll always exactly matched the sizes of their originals, which, for Louetta's birthday, had included a snail the size of a bowling ball, twin giraffes about four feet tall each, and a three-foot tall monkey; therefore, Vini was not surprised to see not only a pack of kittens each about the size of a full-grown wooly sheep, but also an extremely small hippo, barely bigger than an English Bulldog. Though small in size, the hippo was nonetheless ferocious and dangerous, as all hippos are. Pizzo was on the roof too, having led his friends to the scene of the battle through a trap door in the attic.

Fighting waves of sleepiness, and viewing all of this as though in a cloudy dream, Vini saw Pizzo directing the kittens through gestures and by sharply squeaking commands at them. Though extremely willing to help, like real kittens, the kittens from the paintings were easily distracted and disorganized, not to mention more cuddly and playful than ferocious. Fortunately, the hippo was more than making up for the lack of feline ferocity.

Despite the danger and desperateness of the situation, Vini had to smile at the skill of Pizzo. Since the tiny creature didn't particularly warm to her, being mainly fond of Louetta, Vini didn't know much about puck trolls. But she did know that one of their special skills was the ability to awaken magic deep within artistic creations. The flying topiaries made sense now too; she was not hallucinating them either.

So Pizzo doesn't just hide in cups and smock pockets, making faces at people and throwing things, Vini thought. He has other qualities too, better ones, it seems.

Vini was a little surprised that Pizzo would want to help. In truth, puck trolls didn't much like people in general. However, they did often grow to adore certain artistic people. Pizzo, in particular, would sit for hours, motionless, watching Louetta paint, with a dreamy look on his face. And if anyone dared to interrupt her, he would often spit at the intruder. He also liked to throw things, and had a surprisingly good arm (not to mention excellent aim) for such a tiny creature. Since she knew that Pizzo didn't particularly like her, Vini reasoned that he had likely been sleeping in the pocket of Louetta's artist's smock, one of his preferred nap spots, which most often hung on the coat rack in the music room, also the art room of the mansion, and Pizzo's favorite place to hang out. Vini also thought it likely that the puck troll had been wakened by the demons' ruckus, which made him mad at the disturbance to his peaceful and pleasant sleep. Then, of course, he had wanted to restore the peace and pleasantness as quickly as possible. This was a far more likely scenario than Pizzo simply wanting to help. Thankfully, Louetta was not visiting the mansion at present. She and her brother wouldn't be coming again for several weeks. Neither Louetta nor Albert were particularly rough-and-tumble types, and likely would have been in even more jeopardy than either Vini or Sam in their current situation.

Meanwhile, back on the ground, a cottontail rabbit of about the same size as a large hog, and a talking tree nearly five feet in height, had joined the battle, having been roused from their paintings stored in the cupboard of the music room.

Hopping up branches of the oak tree, like climbing twisting stairs, the giant rabbit quickly made it up to the roof. Like all rabbits, this one had enormous back feet, which he used to kick two demons, caught off their guard, clean off the roof. With as hard as the rabbit hit them, they were not able to get control of their wings quickly enough to break their fall. Hitting the ground, they were immediately set upon by the topiaries, and Sugar Bear, who had again picked up the bucket and was swinging it around like one might wield a ball-and-chain mace, which didn't do a lot of good, but which made him feel as though he was helping. He was certainly adding confusion to the brawl, which did help to distract the demons.

Avoiding accidental swipes of the bucket (because Sugar Bear wasn't aiming very well), the talking tree was trying to talk to the topiaries, in an effort to get them organized to be more effective when fighting the demons. And because he too wanted use of a gardening tool, the tree was trying to take the pitchfork from the gorilla. Though the gorilla gave up the pitchfork, grabbing up Sam's shovel that had fallen from the roof, he was none too pleased. In fact, none of the topiaries were pleased by the arrival of the talking tree; and they were none too keen on taking orders from him either. They would definitely take orders from God, and would probably take orders from Pizzo. They might even consider taking orders from Mr. Galloway, but certainly not from a tree that looked to be made mostly of paint, and that didn't even have any real leaves. In the end, of course, after a bit of a tussle over the tools, and after a short and heated discussion as to whose direction would be best to follow, they did end up coordinating with one another, which became very effective in smashing falling demons, kicked from the roof by the very effective feet of the giant rabbit. The gorilla, anteater, and tiger became particularly good at body slamming the evil creatures, basically knocking them out so that the moose and camel could further stomp and flatten them, and so that Sugar Bear (who was getting better with his aim) could give them a further beating with his bucket.

Though the chimney demon had called many demons, fortunately, he had not managed to call the one specifically hunting Vini. If he had, in her weakened state, even with her defenders, she may not have survived. But, then, she did have another Protector, very unlike those currently helping her on the earth. Nothing was outside of God's control, and Vini knew this. Even though He sometimes allowed bad things to happen, these things always had a purpose, even if human beings were not able to understand the purpose. She also knew from reading the bible that God promises to make all things, even bad things, work together for our good; and He always keeps His promises. Perhaps this demon attack was meant to be good training for her, and Sam, and would teach them skills that would be useful in future encounters with demons. *God's ways and thinking are so far above ours*, Vini thought. *Whatever happens, I know these things are meant to be.*

When the hippo began racing around Vini in circles, Pizzo tried to wave him off, worried that she might get trampled. But in truth, the hippo was trying hard to protect Vini, and was being very careful around her. However, at Pizzo's urging, he did move off in order to charge, chomp, and butt the legs of various nearby demons. Nearly as effective as the rabbit, he managed to route two of them completely off the roof.

Locating Vini's dagger, Pizzo found he couldn't lift it because it was much too heavy for such a tiny creature. He could, however, drag it over to her, which he did, with a mighty effort, which took him nearly two full minutes. Unfortunately, though he placed it into her outstretched hand, she was too weak to lift it. Pizzo was forced to back up slightly after giving Vini the dagger because the firebird's heat was basically too much for him. Just touching the dagger made her feel more secure and she thought, *I'm lucky to have this. Praise God.*

Despite her current situation, Vini was also thankful that God had called her to fight evil, though she did almost laugh in remembering how naïve she had been when taking the first baby steps of this endeavor. She had initially thought that she would only have to fight regular run-of-the-mill criminals in the form of human beings, such as muggers, which she had dealt with a couple of times shortly after Tulko first came into her life. She should have known better; with

supernatural helpers like wind horses, she would, of course, need to fight the supernatural evil of the world too. The power of these awesome and noble creatures simply couldn't be reserved to fight ordinary, earthly criminals. However, upon discovering exactly what she was up against, Vini had been a little dismayed because she found herself even more afraid of the demons than of even the vilest people, especially in learning that one of the creatures was specifically hunting her. Though she knew from reading the bible and from attending bible study that Satan could never harm her unless God allowed it, she was still often afraid. As far as both her personality and her ability to take action, she had always been somewhat fearful. Fortunately, in developing a closer relationship with God in recent months, and in trusting more and more in His goodness and His plan for her life, she was getting braver, and learning how to roar, though her skills at this point could have probably only been likened to a quiet roar.

Vini was startled out of her thoughts when Pizzo, a short distance away, let out a terrific yowl, followed by several sharp cries of anger. Craning her neck (a huge effort in her weakened state), Vini struggled to see what was happening. She thought a demon must have gotten hold of him. But as it turns out, he had flown into a rage upon discovering a rip in his bright red trousers that he hadn't noticed until exactly now.

The trouser tear was not surprising, given all of the climbing and racing around he had been doing. However, Vini was surprised because, for all of the melee going on around him, the damage to his trousers was what was causing Pizzo the most despair. But she shouldn't have been surprised because she knew that Louetta had made the fancy pants for him as a gift.

"I can sew that up for you," Vini called to him, "when we get off the roof." *If we get off the roof...* she thought. Though Vini's reaction to Pizzo's distress may have seemed a bit odd, given the seriousness of the situation, she desperately wanted to comfort the little puck troll, who had obviously made such a huge effort (and was still trying very hard) to help.

Surprisingly, through the noise of the battle surrounding her, Vini heard the creak of the side garden gate as it opened. Wondering who could be entering, she had another odd thought (given the situation).

Mrs. Doyle really needs to get an oil can, to get that creak taken care of.

Managing to twist her body and raised her head slightly, from the vantage point of the roof, she was able to see the blond head of her brother coming through the side gate. Having made it through the densest part of the curtain of storm clouds, pulling the collar of his jacket more tightly around his neck, Preston shielded himself as best he could from the wind and rain churning around him as he quickly made his way up the stepping-stone path, intent on taking shelter on the back porch of the mansion. Vini had briefly forgotten that Preston was scheduled to help Sam in the garden today before having archery practice with him. She wanted to shout to her brother, to warn him; but in her dazed and damaged state, she couldn't find enough energy, or wherewithal, to do this. Of course, even if she could have called to him, he likely wouldn't have been able to hear her over the commotion of both storm and battle.

Her head dropping to the roof as she started to lose consciousness completely, she heard the gate creak again, and again, and again...moving back and forth with the wind because Preston, in his hurry to reach shelter, hadn't managed to secure it. The creak of the gate brought back a flood of memories as to how all of this had begun, only nine months before, which to Vini, at present, seemed more like nine years.

Just before she passed out completely, she saw a cloud in the sky shaped exactly like a unicorn that was so close, she felt she could almost...reach out...and touch it...

Chapter Two Doyle Mansion

Nine Months Earlier

Trudging down the street after breakfast toward Doyle Mansion, where she would be cleaning for the next few weeks, Vini was more than a little annoyed. It wasn't just that she hadn't particularly wanted a summer job, especially not one beginning a mere week after school ended; she was also perturbed because the unexpected employment had interrupted a project she was working on, mainly involving reading, which was one of Vini's absolute favorite things to do. In addition to reading, she had hoped to visit the public library sometime in the next few days, to refresh her research materials for the project. Now, with the scheduled work, she wouldn't be able to.

Sighing as she strode past the Galloways' house, she barely noticed the beautiful gardens, both front and side yards. Nor did she see Mr. Galloway waving to her from his perch in the top of his two-story gazebo. However, as she passed the house, she stopped short on the sidewalk for a moment because something in the back yard had caught her eye, namely, a large shrub that reminded her of a rearing unicorn. Vini loved unicorns, the lore of which was actually at the core of her current project. Using information from her research, she hoped to actually find a real unicorn, this being the main goal of her project. Since she had just been reading about unicorns, if there was ever a perfect time for a double take, this was it. Peeking around a photinia hedge gave her a better view of the shrub in question, which, though very tall, and slightly interesting in form, turned out not to look very much like a unicorn after all. This wasn't particularly surprising because Mr. Galloway, though an avid gardener, never pruned his bushes into animal topiaries. He sometimes sculpted spirals and balls out of his trees and shrubberies, but never animals. That type of playfulness simply wasn't his style. (At this point, Vini didn't know

that Mr. Galloway would soon become inspired to make his gardening style that playful.)

Vini wasn't particularly disappointed that the bush was not so much like a unicorn after all and, striding on, she chalked up the initial thought to simply having had unicorns on the brain for a good part of the past few weeks. She actually loved regular horses more than unicorns, but was currently interested in a particular aspect of the magical creatures because of a speaker that had come to her church youth group the previous month. Professor Fulhausen, who taught various classes in Mythological Studies at a local college, had given a wonderful speech, relating all kinds of magical creatures to bible history, and describing what their purposes might have been, and still might be if any could be found in the world of today. Focusing mostly on leviathans and dragons, Professor Fulhausen hadn't gone into much detail with regards to unicorns; but he had gotten Vini thinking because she had always been fascinated by unicorns from storybooks, which is probably why she had developed such a love for horses as well. In his brief mention of unicorns, Professor Fulhausen had said that they were probably related to purity and hope, and suggested that if any could be found in the modern world, they might well solve some of our biggest problems because they had mysterious powers thought to be capable of battling even the greatest of evils.

Long believing that unicorns were real, or at least had really existed at some time in the past, Vini, over the years, had collected unicorn likenesses of all kinds, but mainly stuffed animals and figurines. She also still had a couple of old paint-by-number unicorns hung up in her room, having taken down the puppy and kitten ones she had done around the same time in her younger years. Now, with her interest in unicorns renewed, she had begun seeking out books on the subject.

Kicking at a vine that had been reaching across the sidewalk, likely toward a fencepost it wanted to climb, Vini again felt a surge of annoyance as she thought about what she'd rather be doing instead of cleaning a dusty old house.

Doyle Mansion, as most people called it, might not have been considered to be an actual mansion by some standards. Indeed, given its outward appearance of being more tall than wide, and the fact that it only had seven bedrooms and three bathrooms, it was not the sprawling

kind of house one might think of in terms of a mansion; but it was definitely the largest house on the block at over seven thousand square feet, not counting attic and basement spaces.

Victorian in style, and a registered historical property, the mansion sat on just over four acres of what was generally pristinely-maintained gardens, which, of late, had become somewhat overgrown and unkempt. However, even in this slightly-disheveled state, the property was still very beautiful, particularly because the entire outside of the house had recently been freshly painted, which had been quite a task considering the intricate design of colors in the details of the trim work.

Mrs. Frances May Doyle, an elderly widow living by herself, had lately let the gardening go, mainly because her gardener of forty-three years had recently decided to retire so that he could travel. Mr. Corrigan still gardened on the estate as a hobby and part-time job, but wasn't home from his travels often enough to keep things properly maintained. While he had encouraged his employer and longtime friend to hire someone else, Mrs. Doyle, being used to Mr. Corrigan and sometimes having difficulty getting used to change, had been dragging her heels. However, finally giving in to her now part-time gardener's persistence, and upon his personal recommendation, she had decided to hire a fifteen-year-old boy that Mr. Corrigan knew from his church. "Well, I'll give him a try for the summer, anyway," Mrs. Doyle had said. "Then we'll see if I want to keep him for the fall, and if he even wants to work weekends when school starts again." Sam was lifeguarding at a summer camp for the first month of the summer and wouldn't be starting work at the mansion for about three weeks.

Vini had never spent much time on Mrs. Doyle's end of the block, only passing the mansion occasionally on her bicycle or with her parents in the car when the family was going out to eat. However, she couldn't remember seeing the elderly woman outside in the last few months, which was unusual because Mrs. Doyle loved spending time on her many balconies and on her widow's walk; so it didn't particularly surprise Vini to learn from her mother that Mrs. Doyle had been ill and needed help with cleaning for the summer. What was surprising was that Mrs. Doyle had specifically asked for Vini. Though she had sold Mrs. Doyle a few boxes of Girl Scout cookies, ages ago, and a couple of candy bars for a church fundraiser once since then, Vini had never

actually had a conversation with the woman, who didn't attend her church and, as far as Vini knew, didn't have any kind of close relationship with anyone in Vini's family. Mrs. Doyle had simply called two days ago to ask her mother if Vini would like a summer job, fulltime for a few weeks to get the mansion in order, then part time later when things were more caught up.

Reaching the front gate of the mansion, Vini was suddenly nervous. After all, despite its cheerful appearance (as far as being colorful and having pretty gardens), this was the most foreboding house on the block, with the whole property fenced in black wrought iron that had long spikes on the top, the fence in total reaching probably seven or eight feet high, Vini guessed. Of course, the fence was largely dwarfed by the many ancient and enormous trees surrounding the house, making much of the yard and gardens extremely shady, with the many shadowy nooks and corners lending to the mysterious atmosphere.

At fourteen, Vini had gotten over being afraid of Mrs. Doyle, a tall and somewhat loud woman, who had seemed even taller and louder when staring down at a shy seven-year-old standing on her front steps and trying to sell her cookies. But Vini had never been a good salesperson; it just wasn't something she was cut out to do. Now, as well as being slightly nervous about having a job for the first time, which was going to be different than having chores because she would be working for someone she didn't know very well, and getting paid, Vini was extremely curious as to why Mrs. Doyle had asked for her. Of course, a little excitement was mixed in with the nervousness and curiosity, because this was not only going to be something new to do, Vini was going to be able to start saving money for a car, as well as putting some away for college, and possibly spending a bit of her earnings for some new clothes, or for something else fun. The thought of this put a smile on Vini's face. Though she never truly wanted for anything, her allowance didn't seem to stretch as far as it had when she was younger. And while her parents were putting away money for college, for both her and her younger brother, Vini was sure to need more when the time actually came. This was simply the nature of college—it always cost more than people expected.

Pushing open the front gate, which complained loudly in the form of long creaks and squeals, Vini smiled again, remembering how fearful

she been of that sound when lugging her tote full of cookies up to the front steps. Winding her way along the long front walk, Vini finally reached the house, just as Mrs. Doyle opened the front door. The three gates of the property were purposely never oiled because Mrs. Doyle wanted to hear visitors when they arrived, and she seldom waited for guests to actually ring the door chimes before answering the door. Dressed in a smart-looking pantsuit, and looking just about as tall and foreboding as ever, Mrs. Doyle sported a cast on her left forearm.

As Vini was ushered inside, no longer afraid, and also suddenly not nervous for some reason, she said, "Oh, no wonder you needed help cleaning; I didn't know you had broken your arm."

"Yes, that's part of the reason," Mrs. Doyle replied with a smile. "The other part being that my housekeeper, Violet Nichols, is gone for the summer. And she's been gone since late April, which is why the house is in such a state."

The smile, along with her host's warm and friendly tone, made Vini wonder how she could have ever feared the woman. *Plus, she's probably about ninety*, Vini thought, *and who would be afraid of a ninety-year-old woman? That's just silly.*

As Mrs. Doyle showed her around the mansion, Vini became more and more comfortable, even to the point that she started to feel almost like she was visiting her grandmother, who didn't live in quite as grand of a house, but who did have a similar personality to Mrs. Doyle, along with a few similar belongings, though maybe not any quite this nice, as far as Vini could tell.

Wide-eyed at the intricate furnishings and multitudes of collectibles, Vini had never thought old-fashioned stuff could be so beautiful. The few antique stores she had been in over the years had all seemed so dusty and cluttered, and full of a lot of either broken or half-way broken things that looked very rundown and worn, so much so that Vini had wondered why anyone would bother buying them. Though the mansion was slightly cluttered, it was arranged absolutely beautifully, with all of its furniture and knickknacks better cleaned and much better preserved than most of the things seen in antique stores.

Passing a glass-front cabinet in the formal dining room, Vini was in awe of the lovely china. Taking a deep breath, she thought, *No wonder my mother warned me to be extra careful around the breakables.*

As if reading Vini's thoughts, Mrs. Doyle said, "Don't worry; you won't have to dust anything in there. Violet did it before she left; and it only gets done about once a year. I don't use the china much since I don't often have large dinners anymore."

In the huge butler's pantry just to one side of the dining room, Mrs. Doyle showed Vini a large closet filled with cleaning supplies, along with ladders and stools. Indicating a page of notebook paper sitting on the counter of an enormous buffet cabinet, Mrs. Doyle told her, "I made a list of things to do, for you to refer to if I'm not around. There are a couple of special instructions, but as far as exactly how to clean certain things, I'll just leave that to your judgment. I can tell you that Violet and I usually tackle things top to bottom," she went on. "We start with the ceiling fans and work our way down—fans, tops of cabinets, tops of doorways, tops of bookcases, then the shutters, picture frames, lamps, lamp tables...well, you get the idea—because dirt works its way down from top to bottom. If you dusted all of the tables and trunks and low shelves first, they would end up getting dusty again from stuff trickling down from the ceiling fans, shutters, and whatnot. So you might as well not make extra work for yourself."

Vini was nodding, in perfect understanding, because this was the same method her mother used when cleaning the house, a task Vini often helped with.

"I'll leave it up to you as to whether you do one room at a time, top to bottom, or tackle the whole house, doing all of the fans, then all of the cabinet tops, and so forth," Mrs. Doyle added. "It's probably more efficient to do it that way, the whole-house method that is, but it might be more tiring because you'll end up running around a lot more. You'll definitely get your exercise. When I was doing the cleaning, I used to alternate between the two methods, just for variety, so I wouldn't get bored."

Vini thought she would probably try the more efficient way first, since she had no idea which she might prefer in a house of this size.

"But don't rush yourself," Mrs. Doyle cautioned. "There's no hurry; the dirt's not going anywhere. Remember to take lots of breaks. As you might have noticed, I have plenty of fans but no air conditioning. And drink lots of fluids. If the house gets too stuffy, sit on a porch or balcony for a while—there are plenty of them to choose

from—or sit in the garden, I have lots of benches and chairs here and there outside.”

Vini found she enjoyed listening to Mrs. Doyle; indeed, the woman might have been singing for as nice as her voice sounded, except that she wasn't, of course.

“Now, on to just about the most important room in the house,” Mrs. Doyle said, with a lilt in her tone and slight look of mischief on her face. Smiling, she led Vini through a set of swinging doors at the far end of the butler's pantry and into the huge kitchen. She then proceeded to show her the well-stocked closet pantry and the double refrigerator, which was chock full of just about anything Vini could imagine. “I specifically told your mother that you shouldn't bring your lunch because I have so much food here, and it needs to be eaten. Help yourself to anything while you're here, including all of the snacks and goodies,” Mrs. Doyle insisted. “As far as drinks, I don't keep much soda, but I usually have a pitcher of something in here. Today, I made fruit punch; but I sometimes do sweet iced tea or lemonade.” The freezer held a large assortment of individual ice cream treats, and five or six gallons of various types of ice cream and sherbet.

The tour of the house ended in the kitchen; and as Mrs. Doyle sauntered off towards the living room, Vini eagerly set to work.

By lunchtime, she had fairly well dealt with the ceiling fans throughout the house, though she found the job tricky because of the high ceilings and because she wasn't used to climbing ladders or working with an extendable duster, which was extremely helpful, but somewhat awkward as well. She had also made some progress on the tops of the cabinets and tall bookshelves. In observing how many she still had to do, she thought for sure she would need to save the tops of the doorways for tomorrow. The house had so many doors, and what seemed to be hundreds of plantation shutters. With so many, the shutters were definitely going to have to wait until later too.

Several rooms in the mansion were locked, and Vini couldn't ask about them because Mrs. Doyle had gone to run errands to the bank, grocery store, and a few other places. *Those rooms will keep*, Vini told herself. *And there's no hurry because "the dirt's not going anywhere."*

The house overall was extremely quiet. With only the soft *whirring* from the ceiling fans and a few faint street noises occasionally drifting

in through the open windows to keep her company, Vini found herself quite enjoying her tasks; and after a time, she came to realize what a great benefit it was to get to spend part of the summer away from her noisy eleven-year-old brother. To Vini's view, Preston had always been incredibly loud. In and around his toddler years, she had entertained the hope that he would get over being noisy when he passed ages four or five. Not so, unfortunately. If anything, he had actually gotten louder over the years.

Preston definitely wasn't shy and reserved like his sister. Not that he should have been; in fact, younger siblings often turned out to be exact opposites of their older brothers and sisters, partly because it was natural for human beings to be quite different from one another, and also because they subconsciously wanted to have their own unique identities within families. Unfortunately, Preston's personality and manners were such that he liked shouting much more than he liked speaking in a normal tone, not only when running around blowing off steam, or playing games, but even when he was just doing normal things like chores or watching TV. Most of the time, Vini couldn't even understand what he was shouting about. And who knows what he was always banging on in the back yard and in the basement. Even his footsteps seemed louder than anyone else's steps in the house, a fact their mother often scolded him about. "Quit stomping, Preston!"

After finishing dusting the top of a tall bookcase in the parlor, Vini retreated to the kitchen to have a peanut butter sandwich and an apple, along with a tall glass of fruit punch.

Working on more tops of bookcases and cabinets after lunch, Vini was only an hour into the afternoon cleaning when Mrs. Doyle returned from her errands and invited Vini to take a break for some cookies and milk in the kitchen.

Apologizing for the store-bought oatmeal cookies, after a bite of one, Mrs. Doyle shrugged and said, "They're not bad, even if they aren't homemade." With her arm in a cast, Mrs. Doyle was, understandably, not doing much baking lately.

As they were talking, Vini discovered that Mrs. Doyle had a broken arm because she had been mugged by a group of four teens.

“How horrible!” Vini exclaimed, almost unable to imagine anyone mugging a woman Mrs. Doyle’s age, at least, not to the point of violence.

“I had a concussion too,” Mrs. Doyle said. “I guess I wouldn’t have gotten so badly hurt if I had just peaceably given up my jewelry and my handbag. But something in me just wouldn’t let them go peaceably, particularly not my wedding set, or my mother’s watch.”

“I just can’t quite believe it,” Vini stated, still in shock. “Where did this happen?”

“In that shopping strip on MacMillan Drive, outside of the empty storefront that’s between the insurance office and the taco place,” Mrs. Doyle replied. “Sadly, that was my favorite taco place. Not that they had anything to do with it; but now, I’m not sure I’ll go back. Anyway, when I wouldn’t take off my jewelry and let go of the purse, one of the hoodlums shoved me, and I fell—that’s how I got the broken arm and the concussion. I hit my head on a stone planter. Then they took my purse and jewelry and just left me lying there.”

Vini was shaking her head. On the verge of tears, she said, “I’m so sorry that this happened to you.”

“Well, it’s over now,” Mrs. Doyle replied, “and I’m healing up pretty well. The police officer who took the report at the hospital told me it’s a recent gang initiation practice—to mug an elderly person. Not too smart of a gang, if you ask me. Two of the kids tried to pawn my jewelry right away, less than a mile from the crime scene. The pawn shop owner was suspicious and told them he’d have to have the rings and watch appraised, and told them to come back in an hour; then he called the police. The two fell for it and were arrested when they showed back up. And they were pretty happy to give up their partners in crime, so they all four got caught.”

Both in the television news and from announcements at her church, Vini had lately heard that crimes against seniors had been escalating, and this made her very worried for her grandparents, the two she had remaining. Vini often had trouble sleeping, and worrying over things like this made the problem even worse. Now, actually knowing someone this had happened to, Vini felt even more distress and despair.

“Violet would have wanted to look after me,” Mrs. Doyle went on, “but she’s helping her elderly aunt who just had surgery. It takes a lot

for an older person to recover after surgery, and Violet is so good at that sort of thing. But it's not just help with health issues; her aunt needs help with all kinds of other things too, like paying bills and getting groceries. Plus, she's going to need someone to help look after her from now on, so Violet wants to interview while she's there, to pick someone she feels she can trust to take care of her aunt. Those kinds of things just can't be organized as well over the phone."

As Vini was dunking her second oatmeal cookie into her milk, Mrs. Doyle added, "My grandniece and grandnephew, Louetta and Albert, visit every summer, and sometimes help with cleaning; but they won't be here until the middle of July. Even when they come, without Violet here, I'll need help with the cleaning. So I hope you'll still be keen on coming by then."

"I'm enjoying it so far," Vini admitted, somewhat surprised that she was actually looking forward to tackling more bookcases and cabinets.

However, she was going to have to wait until the morning to do more dusting because Mrs. Doyle said, "You've done enough for one day. I don't want to tire you out."

"But I feel pretty good; I don't mind doing more," Vini stated.

"No, no, enough for now," Mrs. Doyle insisted. "You can pick up where you left off tomorrow."

Leaving the house, Vini felt quite a bit better than she had when she arrived. She even had an odd thought as the gate loudly creaked at her—that the sound was somewhat pleasant, in a musical sort of way, and that it was actually singing to her, the title of the song likely being, *Farewell, See You Tomorrow*.

Waving to Mr. Galloway, who was weeding a flower bed, Vini called to him. "The yard's looking beautiful, Mr. G!"

When Vini arrived home just after two-thirty, even with taking the time to straighten up her room and help her mother with a couple of chores, she still had plenty of time in the afternoon to read. In much higher spirits than when she had left her bedroom early in the morning, she plopped down on her bed with a book and her spiral binder, in which she was recording notes for her project. Flipping open the binder, she thought, *Having a summer job is not going to be so bad after all.*

However, after reading and scribbling notes for nearly two hours, she winced when rising from the bed, and was somewhat dismayed to discover that her legs and arms were incredibly stiff and sore from all of the ladder climbing, reaching, dusting, and other strenuous activities which her body was completely unaccustomed to. Stretching and bending to try to work out some of the stiffness, she told herself, *I'm sure it will get better; I just need to get used to it. I can't believe I'm so out of shape.*

Indeed, other than walking to the library a couple of times, Vini hadn't exercised much lately. She hadn't felt like going to the community pool in the past three months either, though it was an indoor pool that was open year round, and even early mornings and late evenings. She also hadn't felt like hitting the tetherball around with Preston in the back yard lately. And since she rode the school bus, Vini didn't even do much walking normally, the bus stop being less than a block from her house. She also hadn't had to take a PE class since grade school because those classes were no longer required. Now, any types of sports were considered electives, and were treated exactly as things like choir and drama, where kids could pick and choose what they wanted to take. Vini had chosen creative writing, drawing, and sign language as her most recent electives, none of which afforded very much exercise, other than walking to a couple of the portable buildings in which the classes were held.

After dinner, while her parents and Preston were watching the news, which was full of troubling things like murders and suicides, Vini again retreated to her room. Not only did she not want to hear about the latest toddler left in a hot car to die, or the case of animal cruelty in the next county, she also often felt she didn't want to be around other people. She felt much more at peace in just keeping company with her books and stuffed animals. She could only take so much of the world, and people in general, including her own family members.

Getting lost in a book helped to take her mind off of the news, and the worrying thoughts she was having over the mugging of Mrs. Doyle and other senior citizens lately.

Rereading a long passage she had discovered in the afternoon, Vini wrote a few notes in her binder, on the subject of looking for unicorns but not being able to find them.

“We might be looking for something that has a different appearance than what we might expect; therefore, we might not see it. For example, unicorns are not always white; they are often golden in color. Black ones have also been sighted, but only on super-rare occasions. And unicorns can travel faster than the speed of light, which is often why we can’t see them, unless they want us to. When they want us to see them, they will slow down to show themselves to us. And since unicorns have the power to communicate with others by thought, if they want to tell us something, we will hear their thoughts.”

Back at the mansion the next morning, feeling much less stiff and sore after a fairly good night’s sleep, Vini finished the tops of the cabinets and bookshelves that weren’t behind locked doors, and was set to begin working on the tops of doorways and the shutters, when Mrs. Doyle began unlocking doors to specific rooms, one of which was an enormous library on the second floor that completely took Vini’s breath away, along with her voice. Standing just inside the door, and staring for several minutes at the super-high ceiling, and the rows and rows of books lining the walls, Vini was pulled out of her trance when Mrs. Doyle said, “It’s a lot to take in, I know.” Leading the still-astounded Vini into the center of the room, she added, “This library was specially built, with extra reinforcement, to take the weight of the books. Being on the second floor, that was especially important.”

While she was no longer completely entranced, and though her mouth remained open with awe, Vini was still silent as she continued to take it all in. She had never seen so many books before in anyone’s house, thousands and thousands of them. Vini felt tingly, in a sort of way that was like mystery mixed with anticipation, as she gazed adoringly at the treasure trove of books. And that’s exactly how she felt about books—that they were an absolute treasure. And with this many in one place, she felt this truly was one amazing trove.

She spent the rest of the morning in the library, beginning the dusting by starting at the very top and working her way down. The library had rolling ladders attached to the walls, so she didn’t have to drag around the ones from the butler’s pantry. Plus, the ordinary ladders never would have reached the topmost shelves. Climbing up

and down was a lot of fun, though she did have to be careful not to roll too much and lose her balance when really working the dust rag. Throwing open the French doors leading to the library balcony so that she could shake out the rags, Vini saw a cloud in the sky that she thought looked like a unicorn. With the sun's glare in her eyes, the billowy cloud looked deceptively close, as though she could have almost reached out to touch it. Upon closer inspection (after blinking several times and letting her eyes adjust to the glare), the cloud turned out not to have a horn, which made it more like a horse than a unicorn. Smiling, she again chalked up the mistake to having had unicorns in her thoughts so often lately. As she continued to gaze at the cloud, which was holding its horse shape fairly well, Vini thought about the camp she was looking forward to going to for a week in midsummer, which featured horseback riding as one of its main programs. *I guess I've had horses on the brain a lot lately too*, she thought.

By the end of the morning, she had pretty much made her way down to the lowest levels of shelves, for which she didn't need to climb ladders to dust.

On several sections of wall that didn't hold shelves, quite a few antique weapons and pieces of armor were hung on sturdy hooks, very securely, so they could be easily dusted without fear of them falling or moving about to scratch the walls. Using the extendable duster, Vini was able to clean them without using a ladder.

Having a yummy lunch of salami sandwiches and fruit salad with Mrs. Doyle at the kitchen table, Vini said, "It's so amazing that you have so many books. I've never seen so many in one place, except for the public library."

Smiling, Mrs. Doyle replied, "Your mother told me you like to read, and that you always have your nose in a book. I think that's why she thought it was a good idea for you to come this summer, because it would be good for you to get out of the house some. I think it's also good that you like actual books. A lot of older books haven't been made into those e-book things yet, and might never, so people sticking to them are going to miss a lot of good and important reading."

Vini was nodding in agreement because she often did have trouble finding older books among the lists of available library e-books. Also, though she did enjoy reading e-books, there was nothing quite like

holding an actual book in her hands. And, of course, with reading print books, she didn't have to worry about recharging a battery, or worry that her brother might make off with the family's shared tablet in order to play a game. She also didn't like sitting in front of a computer for long periods of time.

"I thought you might like to use my library," Mrs. Doyle said, "so that you don't have to walk so far to the public library."

Deep in thought about books, Vini wasn't sure she had actually heard Mrs. Doyle correctly at first. Though a lot of people didn't mind sharing their books, the offer seemed almost too good to be true. Except that it obviously was true because Mrs. Doyle followed it up with, "I have a lot of mystery and folklore books. You should be able to find something you like."

This was truly too good of an offer not to take Mrs. Doyle up on; and though still speechless, Vini managed a nod and a smile.

"But don't spend all of your spare time reading this summer," Mrs. Doyle cautioned. "It's important to get some fresh air and exercise too."

Again nodding, Vini finally managed to say, "Thank you; I would very much like to borrow some books."

"I've been keeping the library locked," Mrs. Doyle went on, "because a lot of the things in there are pretty valuable—some of the books, the paintings, and whatnots, like that cabinet full of Limoges boxes. If someone breaks into the house, I would want them to have to get through extra locks in order to take things. Of course, there are valuable things all over the house, but the books are something I'm afraid I would have the most heartache over losing."

Getting up and fishing in a drawer near the sink, Mrs. Doyle next presented Vini with a spare key to the library, along with another to the back door, so that Vini could get in and out of the house easily on her own.

"I don't use the front door much," Mrs. Doyle said. "I'd prefer if you'd use the side gate and come in and out of the back door, no ringing or knocking necessary. And I don't feel I need to supervise you, so I want you to just come and go as you wish. I'll leave notes in the kitchen if I need to tell you anything. In a big place like this, it might be hard to find each other. And you can leave me a note if you have

questions or need to tell me something. I know we need bathroom cleanser, by the way, and I already put it on the shopping list. I just forgot it when I was at the grocery store. Also, you should plan on quitting each day around two or three. I don't want to overwork you. You don't need to find me to tell me you're leaving, but definitely find me on Fridays so I can pay you."

Though still distracted somewhat by thoughts of using the library, Vini tried to pay careful attention to everything Mrs. Doyle was telling her. With this much information, she usually liked to take notes, so as not to forget something important later. However, she would have no trouble remembering what Mrs. Doyle said next. "You can take any of the books home with you, nothing is off limits."

Vini was polishing off her fruit salad when Mrs. Doyle took herself off to the parlor to read and play solitaire, and perhaps have a nap, for the afternoon.

While the key to the back door was much like any normal house key, the key to the library was so large, it would have been difficult to carry around in an ordinary-sized pocket, so Vini ended up stowing it in the backpack she had decided to bring with her each day. Since Mrs. Doyle was letting her have plenty of breaks, she had decided to bring her binder and a couple of library books with her. Vini examined the library key more closely as she slipped it into the outer pouch of her pack. The top of the key had an intricate design that, although embellished with scrolls, was squared off and somewhat sharp, which reinforced that it wouldn't be the type of key one might keep in a pocket.

Continuing to dust her way down in the library, upon reaching about waist level of the shelves, Vini decided to wait to do the lower-most ones until she was further along in the rest of the house. She had definitely begun to see the wisdom in the top-to-bottom approach of cleaning, as she had several times had to sweep a few of the worst places on the floor where the dust was settling from being knocked off of higher surfaces. Plus, she already felt a little guilty about not starting on the tops of doorways and the shutters, as she had planned for the day, so she definitely wanted to get going on those as soon as possible.

Mrs. Doyle had told her that the music room was now unlocked. As Vini started gathering her cleaning supplies, she took a last look at the

treasure trove that would have to wait a bit before it could be thoroughly explored. Vini didn't mind waiting. There was no hurry. Just like the dirt in the mansion, the books in the library weren't going anywhere.

Mrs. Doyle had actually decided to unlock all of the doors in the house, which she peeked into the library to tell Vini about. "I guess I got a little over careful after being mugged," she said. "I feel much better now, especially with someone else in the house part of the day. I've never had a break-in, so I'm not sure why I got so worried. Now, I think it's time to relax my security a bit. But still keep that key to the library, in case I decided to lock it occasionally."

In having had a couple of days to look over many of the mansion's contents, Vini thought Mrs. Doyle was right to worry because her home contained many lovely and what Vini assumed were probably valuable items collected from many parts of the world. Even with simply a glance into just about any room, it was obvious that Mrs. Doyle and her husband had traveled widely, as evidenced by the mix of collectibles from Asia, Bavaria, Egypt, Africa, and many other equally-exciting foreign places.

During their initial tour of the mansion, Mrs. Doyle had told Vini that her late husband, Gerard, had been an archaeologist, and a collector of artifacts, his favorites being religious in nature. He had been able to follow his life's passion because his family had some wealth from mineral rights and real estate. She also said he had inherited some of his collections from his father, an historian and a traveler himself.

Though the mansion contained multitudes of items, from many parts of the world, it wasn't a junk pile because Mrs. Doyle kept things neatly spaced and organized, with most of the smaller items residing on shelves and in display cabinets to reduce clutter. She also, obviously, had a knack for decorating, as everything in each room's setting seemed to fit well with everything else, and flow well from one room to the next through wide hallways that were also dotted with a hodgepodge of collectibles. The massive attic and cellar, which Mrs. Doyle had asked Vini to save for later cleaning ventures, were also highly eclectic spaces.

Placing the last of her supplies into the cleaning caddy to take with her to the music room, Vini took the opportunity to examine more closely an elaborately-embellished metal cross hung on the library wall

next to a painting of angels and cherubs. The detail work of the metal was lovely and slightly reminded Vini of the scrollwork on the key to the library. The cross was similar to another in Mrs. Doyle's home, in her bedroom, and Vini wondered if they had been made by the same artist.

Upon noticing that the cross was somewhat dusty, and in trying to use an ordinary dust cloth to clean it, Vini discovered that the cloth ended up catching on the intricate details of the metal, nearly wrenching the cross from the wall. "Oops!" Vini exclaimed, catching and straightening it before it could fall.

Discovering a third intricate metal cross on the wall of the music room, with Mrs. Doyle in the parlor nearby, Vini took the opportunity to ask, "What's the best way to dust the crosses? The cloth just ends up getting caught."

"I'm glad you asked," Mrs. Doyle replied. "I use canned air because even feather dusters catch on them." Retrieving a can of air from the kitchen, and giving the cross a good spray, which loosed quite a lot of dust into the air, she told Vini, "This is also how to dust the wooden model ships that my father built. You can't really get them clean any other way because of all of the little bits and pieces of wood and metal that are so small and delicate. The sails and rigging can't really be wiped down very well either. So just give them a good spray whenever you feel like it," she added, placing the can of air into Vini's caddy.

The cross in the music room even more reminded Vini of the details on the key to the library, and she made herself a mental note to look more closely at the key later.

After tackling the ceiling fans and the tops of two tall cabinets in the music room, Vini moved on to dusting the tops of the doorways on the first floor, and a few of the shutters. At just before three o'clock, she felt like she had come to a good stopping point.

Getting ready to leave for the day, Vini paid another visit to the library. In only a short stroll along the shelves at eye level, she was thrilled to discover a book on magical creatures that was absolutely filled with lore about unicorns. Remembering having seen another book on the subject when dusting, Vini climbed a ladder to search for it. After finding the book, she nearly dropped it in an effort to steady

herself because the ladder suddenly moved. Rolling about four feet to the right turned out to be not only a startling event, but also somewhat spooky because it put Vini directly in front of a huge section of books on myths and legends of which several volumes were devoted entirely to unicorns.

Committing the location of the section to memory, Vini decided just to take the initial two books she had found, as a starting point in borrowing Mrs. Doyle's books. *I can't read them all at once*, she told herself.

One of the books she had chosen appeared to be a lot older than the other, and had what looked like possibly real gold for the lettering. In fact, a tiny bit of gold had come off on her hand when she had gripped the book while riding the rolling ladder. Though miniscule in size, the flake of gold gave off tiny sparkles as she examined it. The spine of the book in question was also somewhat shaky, prompting Vini to retrieve a paper lunch bag from the kitchen to carry it in. Gingerly placing the fragile book into the bag, she reminded herself to be more careful when handling it, so that it would lose no more of its lettering and so that the spine would stay as intact as possible. She then carefully stowed both books into her backpack.

As she was leaving the house through the back door, Vini happened to see Mrs. Doyle on her sun porch, so she stopped to tell her that she was borrowing two books.

"Oh, you don't need to tell me," Mrs. Doyle hurried to reassure her. "I don't need all that extra stuff in my brain. When you've lived as long as I have, you can't fit much more in there, especially since we're only allowed to use ten percent of it. I'll tell you, I can hardly wait to move on to heaven because I think that's when the other ninety percent of the brain will probably come into play." Quieting her tone to almost a whisper, Mrs. Doyle said, "I think that part of our brain is connected to our souls somehow, or possibly our new bodies that we will be given...unless it's just where our thoughts go to rest sometimes after all of the hard work of puzzling over the mysteries of the universe." As Vini was slightly nodding, while pondering ideas she had never heard before about the unused portion of the human brain, Mrs. Doyle nonchalantly added, "Or maybe it's where all the unicorns are hiding.

So, anyway, you just keep all the borrowed books in your own brain. I trust you to bring them back.”

Being a little startled by the mention of unicorns, since that’s where her thoughts had been so focused of late, Vini simply chalked up Mrs. Doyle’s comment to being a funny coincidence. After all, the woman couldn’t possibly have known that the two books in Vini’s backpack were on that very subject.

Meandering along the walkway toward the side gate, Vini smiled. She was really starting to like Mrs. Doyle, particularly because the woman tended to say exactly what was on her mind. Coming from a family whose members were somewhat guarded, Vini hadn’t much encountered many people with such an open flow of conversation before. Thinking more about her employer, and new friend, Vini thought Mrs. Doyle might be one of the most interesting people she had ever met.

At home, Vini’s mother was pleased to hear about her daughter’s productive day, and about Mrs. Doyle’s generous offer of use of the library. “Just be careful with the older books,” her mother warned. “Some are delicate, with crumbling pages and spines that come apart easily.”

“I know,” Vini said, having thought about the issue at least a couple of times on the walk home.

Carefully removing the oldest book from the paper bag, she placed it on her desk, so that she could flip the pages without having to handle it too much.

Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, Vini said a prayer of thanks to God for this blessing. Obviously, the cleaning thing was meant to be, particularly because Mrs. Doyle, it seemed, had a library even better suited to Vini’s interests than the public one, whose Mythology and Folklore section didn’t include very many old books. And this treasure trove was just down the street, no extensive walking to get there, just the walking she would be doing anyway in going to and from work. Plus, Vini had permission to borrow anything she wanted, no library card needed, and no limit as to the numbers of books she could take.

Popping down on her bed with her binder and the less-fragile book, Vini was excited to get started on her research for the afternoon.

However, she hadn't even read two words before she was forced to get up and open the window to call to her brother, who was yelling crazily about something in the back yard, to be quiet. Completely ignoring his sister, Preston continued to yell, until their mother also yelled from the back door, scolding him. "Shush, right now!"

Settling back in to read, Vini thought how odd it was that Preston seemed to find such pleasure in yelling, and sometimes beating on things like logs and rocks with sticks. *What could possibly be fun about that?*

Chapter Three

Dark Corners

In truth, Vini's unicorn project had not wholly come about because Professor Fulhausen had visited her youth group. She had been in despair for quite some time over the state of the world, even in her little protected corner of it, in which she had felt fairly safe until recently as far as the widespread hatred, violence, and other such evil things permeating and growing in the world. But the professor's mention that unicorns could combat evil had started her thinking. From what she had been reading so far, it seemed a lot of people who believed in and searched for unicorns had similar ideas. Indeed, some of the most ardent enthusiasts deemed unicorns (based on their purity) to be the only living creatures capable of standing up to Satan and his followers, which included not only misled human beings, but also many supernatural creatures as well such as demons and fellow fallen angels. In both her research and in attending church, Vini had discovered that only one man had ever been capable of standing up to Satan and actually winning the battle, and this was Jesus, in his perfection. Since the rest of the human race was not perfect, no one else could do this. However, though Satan was defeated, he unfortunately continues to have tremendous influence on the world, with many people being unwilling to find the strength to resist him, and some even considering themselves unable to do so, this being part of the devil's deceptive practices. But while Satan enjoys fostering the idea that he is too strong to resist, the fact of the matter is that, although ordinary people wouldn't be capable of defeating Satan in the same way that Jesus did, God has definitely given every person the capacity to resist the temptations of the devil.

Discovering that some people thought unicorns could actually make headway in the fight against evil gave Vini some hope, which she very badly needed. Even in her relatively short life, based on observation and personal experiences, her hope in the world and its ability to

improve in areas such as kindness and generosity was spread pretty thin. In not being able to escape bad news, and with constantly being surrounded by things like bullying and other types of meanness from peers, Vini had a growing feeling of despair over the future, as to whether or not she would ever be able to find real happiness, perhaps something like the comfort she found when lost in the pages of a good book, but something that wasn't temporary as that type of escapism was.

Seeing the future as rather bleak, Vini wasn't even sure she wanted to live in a world where everyone was fixated on money, and very few people ever seemed to have what they deemed to be enough of it. Reading the bible gave her a glimpse of something like the kind of peace she was searching for, but she hadn't yet felt any sureness in her soul that what she was looking for, namely, a feeling of safety and contentment and trust in the future, would ever come to her. After finding out that her second cousin, Tanya, in college and living in another state, had tried to commit suicide, Vini felt even more depressed, and she thought, *Well, the future of the world is pretty grim. Maybe she didn't have much to stick around for. Why not just escape instead of having to live in a world like this?*

Thankfully, Vini was able to recognize the danger in this line of thinking. Praying and reading the bible helped, along with a perfectly-timed youth workshop at church focusing on the alarming increase in numbers of both suicides and attempts in youths that included the warning signs, even private ones such as those Vini was experiencing in thoughts of despair and longing for escape. The workshop gave good advice on how to turn the thinking around by doing things such as reading certain bible passages, talking to others about the feelings, joining positive and proactive groups, and consulting professionals. One of the suggestions that really spoke to Vini was the idea of taking on a project in order to develop a sense of purpose, belonging, and accomplishment in the world. But she didn't simply want to do the types of projects other people were coming up with like organizing recycling efforts, raising money for good causes, and picking up trash along the highways. Vini wanted to do something unique, something she felt was truly extraordinary, and that could have some fabulous impact on the world. Not that the more common activities were less

important; but somewhere deep inside her soul, Vini felt that she had much more in her, like some sort of ability to make a bigger impact, or discover something few other people would be capable of finding, perhaps even an answer to a great mystery. In thinking about unicorns, and specifically about their ability to communicate by thought, Vini could almost hear them calling to her in the distance. *Come! Find us! We're waiting for you! And when you find us, we will help you change the world!*

However, even with working on something she felt was important and that might make a big difference, Vini still struggled with feelings of hopelessness at times, particularly because she didn't have to look far to find problems. Living on the outskirts of a big city, she had heard about violence, gangs, human trafficking, and other such evil activities for many years; but the issues had remained somewhat distant because the suburbs had been relatively safe, until recently that is, because the drugs, assaults, and other types of crime had been spreading, and were definitely seeping into Vini's little corner of the world. Several homes on her street had been broken into in the last year. Again, Vini reasoned that Mrs. Doyle was right to worry, especially with all of the valuable stuff in her house. *Hopefully, the tall and spikey fence will keep most criminals out,* Vini thought.

Being a teenager, Vini didn't think there was much she herself could do, as far as changing or improving these things. Participating in the local Neighborhood Watch didn't seem like it would help much because it mainly pertained to keeping things safe only in a somewhat small area. So what were some things she could do to make a bigger impact? It seemed to Vini that very little could be done on a large scale by individual human beings, or even groups of them, without some sort of supernatural help, and she often wished for something like a guardian angel to charge in and fix things. From several things she had read in her research, Vini wondered if this was possibly why God had created unicorns, as helpers. But if so, where were they in the world of today? With so many legends about these magical creatures, they surely must exist. *But how can we find them and get them to help?* Vini wondered.

Vini's fretful feelings were not new to her. Being a naturally quiet and reserved person from birth, she had never been outspoken, or a go-getter, or any type of a whiz at solving problems; and she had been a

worrier for as long as she could remember, though it seemed to her that most of her troubles had begun around the time she started sixth grade.

In the city in which Vini lived, sixth grade had been made completely separate from other school campuses. It was no longer part of grade school, as it had been for decades; nor was it part of middle school, a structure adopted by many cities when reorganizing and switching from junior highs to middle schools. For some reason, in Vini's hometown, school administrators and policy makers had decided that sixth grade should be completely isolated from other learning age groups.

Prior to being placed into this situation, Vini had enjoyed school, and had gotten fairly good grades, mostly A's and B's; however, from sixth grade on, she tended to get more B's and C's. Vini's shyness seemed to get worse too. She often wished she was better at talking to people, finding new friends, and being part of more activities. However, in the switch to just one age group at school, things like this seemed to become harder for her. For one thing, she no longer saw her outgoing little brother, or a good friend from Girl Scouts who was a year younger than she. The sixth grade school also had no soccer program, which had been her favorite extracurricular activity. Vini also keenly felt the loss of no longer being able to even say hello to former teachers she was fond of and felt comfortable with. Becoming more reserved, she retreated to the library as often as possible. Both at school and at home, Vini seemed to live in a little world of her own with mainly just her books to keep her company. With no longer seeing many of her friends from Girl Scouts at school (both younger and older), Vini chose not to participate in that program anymore.

In truth, isolating sixth graders was not the only thing the area school administrators had changed. Learning wasn't fun for Vini anymore because it seemed that the classes were no longer challenging. According to her parents, schools had dumbed things down, so that no one would fail and so that their numbers would look good. No child was ever made to repeat a grade or even take summer classes to catch up when they were doing poorly. Books were no longer challenging because unfamiliar words had been taken out of them, so that no child would ever have to ask a question, or wonder about anything enough to make an effort to look something up. Kids were seldom encouraged to

ask questions if they didn't understand something, and this resulted in less time not only in interaction with the teachers, but also in discussion with other students. Reading lists had only simple and what school personnel deemed age-appropriate books on them. Though Vini knew that she was young and had a lot to learn from grown-ups, she also knew that teachers and school administrators shouldn't pigeonhole kids her age as only being capable of handling simple literature. Even her parents had agreed that the reading lists were silly, having only trendy books on them, and nothing that might challenge or encourage kids to ask questions of parents, older siblings, teachers, or librarians.

With the state the schools were in, focused more it seemed on numbers than on quality education, no wonder so many parents were resorting to homeschooling, or working extra jobs to scrounge up enough money to send their kids to private schools. Unfortunately, Vini's parents couldn't manage either of these options in their current situation. Though her mother had some flexible time off from her job, it wasn't enough to provide homeschooling for two children. And even with two incomes, the family wasn't wealthy enough to afford private-school tuition. Their church only had a preschool program, and not enough funding to expand at this time.

Some of Vini's school problems had actually begun in fifth grade where she found herself sitting in front of a computer for large chunks of time each day, and not being asked to do much as far as interacting or discussing things with either other students or her teachers. In this type of setting, there was not much of an opportunity to ask questions. The curriculum was also basically too easy, which caused Vini's mind to drift. Being both distracted and uninterested were big factors as to why she had become such an average student.

In both third and fourth grade, Vini had particularly enjoyed participating in the Life Echoes Challenge, a competition for students in Reading, English, and Language Arts classes that involved writing essays and poems. In fifth grade, the school principal had evidently decided that the school participation in this program needed to be one hundred percent. Vini's parents reasoned that this made the principal look good to the higher-ups, whoever they were.

All kids got a prize for participating, and the same prize, which in Vini's fifth-grade year was a small set of colored pencils. So, those

who hadn't wanted to do the contest, and did a cruddy job on it, got the same reward as the kids who did want to do it, and did a good job on it. This basically took the fun out of the competition for Vini, so she chose not to do it the next year, in sixth grade. Unfortunately, Vini's sixth-grade principal had also adopted the policy of requiring all students to enter the challenge, because he too wanted to look good to the higher-ups. In order to enforce the mandatory participation, the project was made into a graded assignment. Since Vini decided not to participate, she got a failing grade, which brought her overall English grade down from a B to a C. Though her parents were somewhat disappointed, Vini found she didn't particularly care. In fact, she felt good about her decision, as though she had managed to gain a small amount of control over her own learning situation; and this made her feel somewhat empowered. Vini's teacher didn't particularly care either, as she was more interested in looking good to her principal than in finding out why Vini hadn't done the assignment, or giving her some sort of other assignment to complete to make up the grade.

Vini had what she felt were better English teachers in seventh and eighth grades, and she did better in those classes. However, she still wasn't all that interested in school because it was neither interesting nor challenging. She felt she could learn much more from books she found in the library. However, she ended up having to go to the public library because the variety of books in the middle school library was very limited, with few older books available, even fewer classics, and mostly trendy books on the shelves, many of which were not all that interesting. Vini loved mystery novels; but it seemed to her that most of the plots in newer books were incredibly familiar, like she had read them before. She often had the endings figured out from only having read the first couple of chapters, and nothing at all was surprising about the stories. This seemed very odd to Vini, who couldn't imagine why writers of books couldn't come up with anything original. With the world being as complex as it was, and human beings all so unique and complex themselves, this was incredibly baffling, and part of the reason Vini had decided to shoot for a unique project, unlike anything she had heard of before. Even if she didn't succeed, she felt it was worth a try. Why not try to do something completely different, rather than the same old things?

When she continued to get B's and C's in middle school, Vini's parents didn't particularly fret, thinking they had simply an average child getting mediocre grades, which was perfectly fine by them. As long as she wasn't failing, they felt they had enough other things to worry about, like how they were going to pay for college for two kids, and how to afford to keep good health insurance for the family.

With being extremely busy, Vini's parents never recognized that their daughter was actually experiencing symptoms of depression such as not sleeping well, getting agitated easily, being excessively worried, not taking an interest in things she once enjoyed, having low energy, and becoming even more withdrawn.

Fortunately, even at her young age, Vini recognized the symptoms, mainly because she knew several kids at school who were being treated for depression with medications. Although this did seem to help them, Vini didn't particularly want to take pills. Since she didn't know that medications were often short term, used to get the worst symptoms under control, she ended up telling herself, *What am I supposed to do, take pills my whole life? Why can't the world just be a better place to live in?* Being a diligent reader and already a good researcher, Vini ended up finding some advice in books that could help with her symptoms such as getting more exercise, eating as nutritiously as possible, and keeping to a strict sleeping schedule, which included not sleeping late at all, not even on holidays and weekends. Frequently groaning when the alarm clock sounded at six o'clock on Saturday mornings, she often quoted that old saying to herself, "Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise." Her brother and parents couldn't particularly understand why Vini got up so early on weekends, since they preferred to sleep in. Though she didn't always want to, it truly helped her to fall asleep quickly at night, and stay asleep soundly, as long as she wasn't overly worried about something.

Also fortunately, during her middle school years, as her parents became more involved in church and as Vini grew closer to God, her worries subsided somewhat and her path through life became slightly smoother. Getting more involved with the church youth program helped Vini find people she could trust and talk to.

However, still facing many of the same school worries and challenges, Vini hadn't enjoyed middle school much better than she had sixth grade, and there was no guarantee that high school, which she would be starting in the fall, would be any better. In fact, Vini imagined that it might actually be worse with the added pressure of getting good grades in preparation for college. And if what she was hearing about high school was correct, there were even more cliques and mean kids to deal with than those in middle school.

Taking a tour of the high school campus with classmates in the spring hadn't alleviated any of her concerns. If anything, it had pushed a panic button in Vini, in making something that had seemed somewhat distant into a very near and concrete threat. Of course, she knew she was not alone in her worries, as many of her peers were also dreading high school; but thinking about it certainly hadn't helped with her sleep difficulties. With less sleep came less energy, and less enthusiasm, even for things Vini might ordinarily have greatly enjoyed. One of the things she had enjoyed the most over the years was swimming in the natural, spring-fed pool located in a park near her home. However, when the pool opened on weekends four weeks before school let out for summer, Vini hadn't felt like going, not even when her parents and Preston coaxed her. She hadn't felt like riding her bike lately either. Though she knew she needed more exercise, because that was one of the things that could help battle depression, it was so hard to get either energy or motivation for this.

In recognizing that her dislike of school was again growing, and in trying to psych herself into a change of attitude, in which she could actually look forward to high school, Vini was able trace her recent downturn of emotions back to an incident that happened at school just after spring break.

Easter had fallen somewhat late this year, and came after spring break. On Good Friday, one of Vini's classmates, Boyd Drummond, brought to school a huge bag of plastic, multi-colored eggs filled with candy, each also containing a bible verse printed on a slip of paper, to give to other kids.

Unfortunately, just before the first class of the day, Vini's homeroom teacher, Mrs. Davidson, noticed Boyd handing the eggs out to other students, and she immediately put a stop to it by confiscating

the bag and sending Boyd to the front office to have a talk with the school vice principal because, evidently, no “religious propaganda” was allowed in schools. Vini couldn’t believe it. Here he was trying to do something that he felt was right, and that might actually bring a little brightness to what Vini felt was a somewhat dark corner of the world, and he got shot down for it.

The next week, Vini discovered that Boyd’s parents had tried to make a fuss over the issue and force the school to allow their son the same free speech rights as other students; but they were shot down as well when Boyd was threatened with suspension if he brought bible verses to school again with the intent to distribute them. In Vini’s school district, in the rare instances when kids were suspended, the parents of the child had to pay a fine, evidently to make up for some sort of funding the school would have gotten if the child had been in school during that time. Rather than risk the fine, Boyd’s parents had quieted down and dropped the issue, which is of course what the school wanted. Vini’s teacher had also made Boyd apologize to their homeroom class “...for bringing religious materials to school and infringing on the rights of others.” Mrs. Davidson had actually written this out on a card for him to read to the class.

Vini was disgusted, and again couldn’t believe what was happening. She wanted to shout that this was wrong, and that he shouldn’t apologize, and that he should be allowed to hand out candy and bible verses. Unfortunately, she ended up keeping quiet, as she often did, about a lot of things, even important ones. In feeling guilty about not speaking up, she did pray about it afterwards, which helped her to feel somewhat better. But anytime she saw Boyd, or thought about the issue, she felt incredibly sad, and distressed, and like the whole world was falling to pieces, and becoming full of even more dark corners.

In discussing the matter at home, Vini’s parents couldn’t believe the situation either, and felt the school, in spouting the jargon of “separation of church and state” in connection with the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, was really skewing the issue, and making it into something that it was never intended to be.

Vini was right to compare the Easter-egg situation to something dark and horrible because something dark and horrible would actually occur as a result of the incident, something unforeseen, but that could

have been prevented if a specific bible verse inside one of the eggs had reached a certain classmate who, twenty-four years in the future, would end up killing a woman with a car while drunk driving and subsequently killing himself two years later from the guilt of it. Unfortunately, the bible verse that could have drastically changed this course of events never reached the person it was intended for.

Though it might seem incredibly harsh to lay this at the doorstep of Vini's teacher, the fact of the matter is that if Mrs. Davidson had allowed the distribution of the Easter eggs, the tragedy and lasting effects would not have occurred. Unfortunately, many people never stop to consider that the impact of even the smallest of their words and actions can end up changing the world, unexpectedly, and often in drastic ways. In this case, not only were two individuals dead, the lives of many of their friends and family were affected. Additionally, the woman killed didn't have the opportunity to have a child she was meant to have who would have found a cure for cancer. Though Vini's teacher, during her lifetime, would not realize the enormous impact her actions had on the lives of so many others, she would eventually become aware of this, in being called to give an account of her life to God when facing judgment.

When recalling the Easter-egg incident, Vini thought, *No wonder so many kids are depressed.* And she couldn't help but wonder what people had possibly gained from keeping God and morals out of schools. With basically no rules, except ones set by policy makers, schools basically became a free-for-all, where kids could be as ugly to one another as they wanted to be, and with no one being allowed to do anything about it because, as long as they weren't killing each other, pretty much anything was tolerated, except positive sharing, it seemed. However, in a neighboring suburb, a high school kid *had* recently killed a classmate, after bullying and tormenting him for several months. Though the bully hadn't actually plotted to murder his fellow student, the victim was beaten so badly that he died the next day. The school had hushed it all up somehow afterwards, in an effort to prevent a lot of clamor and parents taking action to try to restore some safety to the schools. Other than the school hiring more security guards, it didn't seem like much was done to address the issue of violence in the high schools. Vini's parents certainly hadn't taken the issue lightly, and

were very worried about both of their children's safety in school, particularly because Vini had actually gotten beaten up by a girl in third grade. However, they didn't know what they could do about it, other than just pray that their children would remain safe.

While Vini was reading one of Mrs. Doyle's books after dinner on Friday, her mother came to her room to ask if she wanted to walk with her to deliver a gift bag to a woman down the street who had just had a baby. Not feeling particularly energetic or sociable, Vini declined, unaware that the sight of a precious baby girl and the baby's joy-filled mother would have greatly cheered her up—mind, body, and spirit.

It was often hard for Vini to recognize good things happening in the world when so many bad things tended to eclipse them.

One of the speakers recently at her youth group had mentioned that there was not enough of anything in the world to fill the longing of the soul—not belongings, not admiration from other people, not money, not anything. Therefore, human beings needed to look somewhere else, namely to God, to fill their souls and to truly be happy. Human beings were also out of place in this world, as it was only a temporary home compared to the infinity of our Forever Home in heaven. So they definitely couldn't rely on anything here to truly satisfy the soul. Though Vini recognized the truth in this concept, she didn't particularly know what steps to take to get started going in the right direction, towards true fulfillment and happiness. She didn't know that sometimes the littlest things, like gazing at the wonder of a newborn baby, could actually be a leap forward in coming closer to understanding God's plan for her life. Standing up for Boyd in the spring might also have propelled her closer to her purpose. But with her reserved personality, and issues with school, it was difficult for her to be brave in that setting.

Vini might have been considered to be a mediocre student by measure of her grades; but in truth, she was anything but mediocre as far as being intelligent and intuitive. Her ability to discern, to make wise assessments and easily recognize certain things that other people might be unaware of, was especially pronounced. Going back to probably around age six, she discovered that she had the ability to know when others were telling the truth, or lying, which made it easy for her to escape shysters, and avoid being taken in by the manipulation of others. Human beings were each given a certain measure of

discernment; but Vini, it seemed, had been given an extra dose of sensitivity, particularly with regards to people, which turned out to be both a blessing and a curse at times.

Although being easily able to tell if people were up to no good or had ulterior motives was a benefit, isolating herself from situations in which she would have to encounter these people had, over the years, made her seem somewhat aloof, which had actually caused other people to avoid her, thus, adding to her isolation. Vini wasn't particularly anti-social, as she was sometimes labeled; she was simply not interested in hanging out with people who liked to lie to or take advantage of others. And since there was a lot of that going on, especially in the overly-competitive atmosphere that most schools fostered, Vini found herself excluded from many groups and had developed very few close friends over the years.

Her super-strong sensitivity often caused her hurt in a different sort of way as well, in particular, when exposed to the harsh and hurtful ways some people tended to treat others. A good example of this had been playing out for the past few months at the house directly behind Vini, which was far too close for her comfort, but which she couldn't avoid because she could easily hear and see things from both her bedroom window and when she happened to be in the back yard. A couple with two sons, one twelve and one three, lived in the house. For some reason, the father was always yelling at the older boy, and criticizing him. One time she had even heard him say, "You're a selfish bastard! You only think of yourself!"

She also often heard the father comparing the two boys, and telling the older things like, "Your little brother is only three, and he's helping. He doesn't complain. He's not causing problems." Only the previous weekend, Vini had heard the father ask, "Are you two years old, or are you twelve?"

Vini hadn't heard the son's quiet response, but she definitely heard the father when he yelled, "Then act like it!"

Another time, when the neighboring family was outside doing yard work, the father asked his son to bring him a soft rake, whatever that was. (Vini figured out later that it was the leaf rake, as opposed to the standard garden rake used for smoothing out dirt.)

Again, Vini was unable to hear the boy when he spoke, but she for sure heard the father's words. "I don't know what color it is! Why can't you just do what I tell you without asking stupid questions?"

The father, it seemed to Vini, couldn't be particularly bothered to teach his son how to do chores. He just somehow expected the boy to do things and be helpful without asking questions and without being shown what to do.

Since there were different type of rakes, and the family owned multiple ones, why was it wrong for the boy to ask a question? Vini definitely couldn't understand this.

In thinking of some of her own chores, such as recently refinishing her mother's antique rocking chair, Vini was so thankful that her father had shown her what to do. If she had been expected to just do it, without any instruction and without being able to ask questions, she might not have used the tools safely, and she might well have messed up the rocker by gouging it or leaving other unsightly sanding marks. Plus, she wouldn't have known to use eye and ear protection without her father telling her. He had also watched to make sure she understood and was getting the hang of the sander before leaving her to the task alone. She also knew how to safely start and use the lawnmower, this too because her father had shown her.

Only the previous weekend, Vini had heard the neighboring dad again yelling at the twelve-year-old because the dog had gotten out. Well, the father had been using the weed whacker in the back yard and had left the gate open, not the son. And as far as Vini could tell, the father hadn't told the son to keep an eye on the dog or shut the gate. So she just thought this was totally unfair, for the boy to be blamed.

It often hurt Vini terribly to listen to people who evidently had no clue as to what impact their words might have on others, particularly because harsh and overly-critical words frequently had the power to drastically change a person's life, often very negatively. If the father did know, perhaps he just didn't care that he was being cruel and insensitive, which was an even worse prospect to Vini. Or perhaps he was just so overwrought by the troubles of his job, or something else, that he had a hard time being patient and loving, instead of critical and irritable. Even if this were so, it seemed a poor excuse to Vini.

The difference between the two sons, as far as how the father was treating them, made Vini wonder if the older boy wasn't his own son, but a stepson. Vini never heard the mother of the boys say anything to her husband about how he was treating the twelve-year-old. Sadly, one set of grandparents also lived at the house, and never said anything either, as far as Vini could tell.

Even more sadly, Vini could already tell what was likely to happen in the future. With the father favoring the younger son, she could imagine bad feelings developing between the siblings as they grew older. Also, with the older being made to feel like he couldn't do anything right, he likely wouldn't have the confidence needed to survive in the world of today. Kids with low self-confidence often ended up not being able to stand up to bullying and pressure from other kids, and ended up in troubling situations, not to mention how it might affect him in the future when he would have to hold down a job or raise a family of his own.

Although it had been a rough year for Vini so far, as far as not sleeping well and stressing over things, the summer seemed to be off to a good start. Despite occasional bouts of worry, she was focused on a project that she felt very positive about. She was also enjoying her new job. However, she did feel somewhat guilty about her initial ugly thoughts about the prospect. *Boy was I wrong*, she thought. *I shouldn't have prejudged. This is definitely a lesson learned.*

Suddenly realizing that she was missing an opportunity to visit a neighbor and see a newborn baby, Vini decided to run after her mother.

Passing a house whose occupants were setting up for a garage sale they were having the next morning, Vini noticed a large standing oval mirror that was sitting just inside the garage door and facing the street. The mirror had drawn her eye because she thought she saw a shadowy image, almost like a dark gray rain cloud, pass across the surface, which seemed odd because, with the slant of the evening sun fully illuminating the inside of the garage and pretty much all of its contents, the mirror should have been lit up, not dark and cloudy. In addition to seeing the shadow, Vini briefly felt cold, like a chill running up her spine, which was also odd because it was nearly ninety degrees outside. As she slowed her stride for a second look, the mirror quickly lost its shadow and appeared bright and shining, and perfectly ordinary.

Hurrying to catch up to her mother, whom she could see about half-a-block ahead of her, Vini shook off the coldness, while deciding that the shadow was simply something she had imagined, the result of so often lately having gloomy thoughts on the brain.

In seeing and getting to hold baby Eliza, Vini briefly wondered how gloomy thoughts could even exist in the world. Walking home with her mother a short while later, she felt full of life and energy, so much so that, after returning home, she kicked a soccer ball around with Preston in the back yard for nearly an hour before coming inside to settle down to read again.

Waking up early Saturday morning, Vini found she wasn't nearly as sore as she had been the previous two days, and any lingering soreness worked itself out during her walk to the mansion.

Vini wasn't scheduled to work weekends, but Mrs. Doyle had asked if she wanted to put in two or three hours on Saturday morning, to help get the initial cleaning a little further along. Not having any particular plans, and looking forward to the extra income, Vini had welcomed the opportunity.

She did a little over three hours of cleaning, and felt good about getting the rest of the plantation shutters dusted, as well as most of the wall pictures in the home. Mrs. Doyle, despite her broken arm, had cleaned all three bathrooms on Friday afternoon. The whole mansion, it seemed, was getting into good and sparkling shape.

Realizing that she had missed one of the guest bedrooms when dusting pictures, Vini trudged back up the stairs to the third floor. When she opened the bedroom door, she noticed a large standing mirror, similar in size to the one at the garage sale, but rectangular in shape rather than oval, sitting beside the window and angled to somewhat face the door. Though the shape and size were nothing odd, the surface of the mirror held a glow as though reflecting light from what might have been a lamp somewhere in the room, except that the room contained no lamp, not even a small one. It certainly could have used one because a set of heavy curtains, which Vini thought she had left open after dusting the shutters, were currently drawn, allowing very little light from outside to trickle into the room. Since no light was on in the hall, Vini couldn't image what was making the glass glow. As she slowly stepped into the room, the light in the mirror quickly faded,

disappearing entirely within a couple of seconds. Drawing near to the mirror, Vini simply saw her reflection, though barely for as dark as the room currently was.

Opening the drapes so that light could filter in through the slats in the shutters, Vini dusted the wall pictures as quickly as possible, in a hurry to leave the room because she felt somewhat spooked from the light she had seen. Though she still wasn't positive she had seen a shadow in the garage-sale mirror, she certainly hadn't imagined the light she had just seen in this one, and she wondered if she might have just seen a ghost.

Or maybe it was an angel, Vini thought, as she made her way back down the stairs a few moments later.

After stowing the cleaning caddy in the closet of the butler's pantry, Vini sought out Mrs. Doyle in the hall, and slowly asked, "I wonder...I mean...could there maybe be...um...ghosts, in the house?"

"Oh, very possibly," Mrs. Doyle responded, in a matter-of-fact tone. "The house is ever so old, and a lot of old houses like this have ghosts." Sauntering off to the kitchen in a nonchalant way, as though they might have been talking about furniture polish, Mrs. Doyle added, "Well, I'll see you Monday."

As Vini was paying a quick visit to the library to pick out a couple of books before leaving, Mrs. Doyle popped her head in to say, "On the subject of ghosts, since you'll probably be spending some time in the gardens, I wanted to warn you about that far corner, back of the privet row, near the stone bench that's close to the mulberry tree. It's got a bad vibe to it and nothing much grows back there, just a couple of tangles of hearty jasmine along with a few weeds. Mr. Corrigan has been trying to get stuff to grow there for years and has never been successful. Anyway, I'd avoid that corner because it's just not all that pleasant for some reason."

After Mrs. Doyle's head popped back out of the doorway, Vini made her way to a window overlooking the back gardens. She could just see the spot Mrs. Doyle had been talking about, and understand exactly what she meant. Given the time of day, and the position of the nearby trees, the corner in question should have been fully bathed in sunlight. However, it looked dark and shadowy, as though an enormous invisible tree was shading it.

As she was leaving the house, gazing in the direction of the mulberry tree, Vini couldn't see anything peculiar. Loving mysteries, she might ordinarily have wanted to investigate. Today, instead, she decided to heed Mrs. Doyle's advice and avoid the dark corner of the garden, particularly because something inside her felt very unsettled. Though keeping busy, and so far enjoying her job, Vini still felt distracted and worried for some reason. In glancing back at the mulberry tree as she was closing the side gate, Vini suddenly thought of the shadowy coldness of the garage-sale mirror, and she again felt a chill up her spine.

As she closed her eyes and said a quick prayer to God, thanking Him for all of His many blessings and asking Him to protect Mrs. Doyle and Doyle Mansion, the chill immediately vanished. With the sun shining brightly on her, as though holding her, she felt the comfort of the Holy Spirit inside her and instantly felt more settled. Smiling and taking a deep and peaceful breath, Vini's gaze fell to something she had never noticed before, namely, three perfectly round stones situated in the center of a small rock garden just outside the gate. Reminded of the Trinity, in particular how Jesus came to save us, to save the whole world, she suddenly felt even more peaceful, and powerful, as if she truly could have some impact on the world, eventually.

With the sun shining on her shoulders, Vini thought of something she had read in the bible, in Revelation, about how in our future home we won't need the light of a sun or moon because Jesus will be like a lamp beside the father who shines like the sun. Remembering how she thought it was a lamp in the bedroom that was shining in the mirror, Vini now felt sure she had seen an angel, or something equally wonderful. *Like maybe Jesus sending a messenger, she thought, or something else to help combat the darkness.*

Though Vini was acutely aware of the darkness in her little corner of the world, which greatly saddened and worried her, she was often even more troubled because she knew it was a reflection of something much larger, now everywhere, and something that seemed almost unstoppable, and that many people wouldn't be able to stand up to, particularly not shy people. However, as she would soon discover, there is not enough darkness in the world to combat the light of Jesus Christ.

Chapter Four

Bells and Chimes

Trudging home, Vini was happy that she had gotten so far along on the cleaning project; and she was looking forward to Monday when she would tackle various shelves, knickknacks, tables, and the lower shelves of the library. It felt good to finally be getting closer to the floor.

Even with the busy morning, and with doing a few chores after lunch, Vini still had plenty of time for reading in the afternoon. She had borrowed another two books from Mrs. Doyle's library. Delving into the thicker one, she again found information stating that unicorns might not resemble those from popular mythology or storybooks. But this time, instead of focusing on the color of the creatures, the book stressed that, while unicorns were probably roughly the size of horses, their physical characteristics might be very unlike horses, even to the point of looking more like birds or reptiles. The book gave an example of the narwhal being called the unicorn of the sea. Clearly, narwhals were not unicorns, as they did not even remotely resemble them; yet, they were called this, as a sort of nickname. Similarly, manatees had sometimes been mistaken for mermaids, when they clearly were not. But this type of labeling over the centuries had caused a sort of muddle as to what creatures such as unicorns and mermaids might really look like.

Feeling that the information in this particular book was something of a muddle itself, and wasn't leading her in the right direction, Vini moved on to the second book she had borrowed, which seemed to speak more clearly to her. One thing that particularly fascinated her, and that she hadn't read before, was that unicorns were often associated with water, the purity of water, and even baptism. In fact, some people had actually reported seeing unicorns shortly after being baptized. The writer of this book also speculated that unicorns probably did not look like those in storybooks, and suggested that they might actually look more like sea creatures than horses, based on their connection to water.

So maybe that's what the other book was trying to say, Vini thought, since narwhals and mermaids are sea creatures.

Opting to give the thicker book another chance, Vini switched back. In reading only a bit further, she came across a mention that unicorns travel faster than the speed of light, which she remembered reading in another book. So this evidently was a common belief.

So they might have to be standing still for us ever to see them, Vini pondered. And maybe they like to run more than they like to stand still. If I was a unicorn, I'd rather be running than standing still.

The same book contained information about dragons that sounded a bit outlandish to her. Reading aloud to her Raggedy Ann doll, who was leaning against a stuffed purple unicorn propped next to her pillow, Vini's voice held a slight note of scorn, along with amusement. "Creatures such as dragons are seldom seen in the world of today, as many are sleeping inside of volcanoes in deep hibernation. Others are thought to live among the stars, having been banished to the heavens by more powerful forces because they were too unpredictable, fierce, and clever, which made them too dangerous to live safely among other creatures."

Suddenly remembering something Professor Fulhausen had said, Vini flipped pages in her binder to find her notes on his lecture. "Dragons of old seldom hurt people," she told her doll, "because they had been warned by God not to harm or interfere with His children."

Glancing over other notes she had taken from his talk, Vini put a star by the word, halcyon. This was a creature she had never heard of before, some kind of magical bird with the power to calm sea winds and storms so that sailors might travel safely. She definitely wanted to look this up because it sounded really interesting, and particularly because the professor had connected it to biblical events. Since Jesus could calm seas, Vini could almost imagine Him, after ascending to heaven, sending little helpers like magical sea birds to do more of this for Him. She could also imagine the birds being so happy to do this all-important job of helping God to protect mankind. And whatever the job of unicorns might be, she could imagine them being happy too, in carrying it out.

Even in only her limited research so far, she felt sure that unicorns were closely related to God, not just in the mention of them being

connected in some way to baptism, or in being pure creatures, but in other ways as well. If they were immune to evil influences, and full of light, as many accounts she was reading about them asserted, Vini felt sure they were somehow divine.

The thick book might have contained a few muddled and outlandish ideas, but it was beautifully illustrated, and Vini soon found herself completely lost in the dreaminess of a particular painting featuring a golden-colored unicorn.

They must exist, she thought. God wouldn't have put unicorns into the hearts of man if they didn't exist. I'll never stop believing. Taking a deep breath, and with firm conviction, she voiced her last thought aloud. "I'll never stop believing."

Though only her doll and stuffed animals were in the room to hear her words, Vini was sure that God had heard both her thoughts and words; and she couldn't see any reason why He wouldn't allow her to find a unicorn, especially since it was unlikely that anything about the creatures might be displeasing to God. At least a few other people in the past must have found them, or there wouldn't be so many stories and other things written about them. And Vini had always been good at research, so that shouldn't be a stumbling block either. Plus, if unicorns were somehow related to God, she felt He might actually help her to find one, especially if it was true that they could bring good back into the world. Even if unicorns didn't exist anymore, if they were possibly extinct, nothing was too hard for God. He could easily bring a unicorn back into the world, if He wanted to.

In the same way that Vini was able to tell when people were telling the truth, she was also able to discern which parts of what she was reading contained the most truth, such as unicorns being connected to water, and that they could communicate by thought. So, although she was reading legend, she just felt certain somehow that, if she were to ever truly find a unicorn, those particular aspects would ring true.

Vini was startled out of her ponderings by the sound of church bells ringing in the distance. Listening closely, she was able to tell that the bells signified a wedding, and not a funeral, which made her feel very happy. Vini couldn't understand why some people couldn't discern between funeral bells and wedding bells because she had always been

able to tell the difference. Funeral bells had a more muffled sound, while wedding bells were sharper and clearer.

Vini briefly considered running three blocks to the church to see if she could catch a glimpse of the bride, because it was considered good luck to see a bride on her wedding day. Though some people might have considered superstitions to be silly, Vini definitely subscribed to them. Not that she particularly believed a lot of them, but more because they were kind of fun; and people needed to have some fun in life.

Frowning slightly, Vini suddenly remembered something that had happened back in April, somewhat related to the issue of superstitions. She had been reading a book from the library on the subject of feng shui, which could be briefly defined as the Chinese art of placement. This was an ancient practice based on philosophy in which colors, shapes, compass directions, and even numbers all had importance in designing and decorating homes, and in doing landscaping projects. Many of the basic concepts were simply common sense such as avoiding placement of furniture with sharp corners in areas where people walking by were likely to get jabbed by the corners. Another good suggestion involved clearing up clutter that might be a distraction and a hindrance to keeping the home clean. Some of the ideas were less straightforward and were what many people would deem to be superstition and fancy, such as avoiding large representations (statues, paintings, etc.) of powerful animals like lions and bears inside a home. This was based on the idea that the energy of these creatures would be too powerful for a confined space and would take away from the peacefulness of the home. Other feng shui principles had to do with the way energy moves around, and with finding ways to disperse and redirect bad energy using things like wind chimes and crystal prisms.

After reading about some of these concepts, Vini hung a crystal prism in her bedroom window, which faced west. In addition to being hopeful that it would help to disperse the harsh afternoon light, she thought the colors the prism displayed on the walls of her room in the afternoons were very beautiful. Like many people in the world of today, Vini often found herself looking for even the smallest of cures to counter the many harsh realities of life. And since the crystal seemed as benign as something like crossing her fingers for luck, she certainly couldn't see any harm in hanging it; that is, until her Aunt Carol, the

wife of her mother's youngest brother, Tim Holland, told Vini that she thought it was blasphemous.

Startled by this statement, Vini avoided hanging the wind chimes she had bought for the back porch until she had a chance to talk to one of her pastors at church, Pastor Meyer, who explained to her the difference between blasphemy and idolatry, neither of which Vini was guilty of. The pastor felt her aunt had likely meant idolatry, but had gotten mixed up.

"Anything that we put before God, and place more importance on than Him, is idolatry," Pastor Meyer said. "The most common thing nowadays seems to be money. It's easy for people to idolize money. But it could be anything—someone's reputation, a hobby, other people, whatever. As long as you're careful not to let something like feng shui become more important to you than God, or let it get in the way of hearing God, or following Him, or studying the bible, this won't hurt your relationship with Him."

Vini was nodding, as she completely understood, and she listened carefully as her pastor continued, with something of a warning. "Although these kinds of things can make us feel better, and some people think they can protect or act like talismans against things like bad energy, the only thing that can truly protect us and combat evil is Jesus Christ. So if you are looking for cures for the problems of the world, look mainly to Him. He is the answer, the only answer."

Continuing to listen carefully, Vini was very surprised when Pastor Meyer gave her even more in-depth information about feng shui, along with some further advice. "Feng shui is based on Chinese five-element philosophy, and is very focused on nature. Greek four-element philosophy is based on things more ethereal, and therefore might be more closely related to God, especially because there actually is a fifth element in Greek philosophy, a missing element, known as quintessence, which is some kind of unknown element, said to occupy the heavens. So, anyway, as you're reading up on these things, don't just get stuck in one mode. We often need to broaden our horizons in order to learn and grow." As Vini was again nodding in understanding, her pastor's words again contained a warning. "But keep in mind that in Isaiah 55:8-9, God clearly states that His ways of thinking are much higher than ours. So while exploring different philosophies, we can't

lose sight of Jesus because He is way more important than all human philosophies put together. God's ways and thinking are so far above ours, human philosophies are piddly in comparison, so we shouldn't put too much emphasis on them. Just study the bible, learn from it, focus on Jesus, follow the commandments of God, and your life will go smoothly and count for something, I assure you. I've lived long enough to know that this is true."

Vini, with her ability to discern, also knew this to be true. She absolutely knew in her bones and in her soul that what she was hearing was the truth.

"I don't understand why your aunt called it blasphemy," her pastor added, shaking his head in both confusion and concern. "When you hang a set of wind chimes, you are definitely not speaking against the name of God, or the Holy Spirit, or being irreverent to anything considered sacred, or showing contempt for God in any way."

"I didn't understand it either," Vini said, also shaking her head.

On a lighter note, smiling and with laughter in his voice, Pastor Meyer added, "It sounds like your aunt may need to take the log out of her own eye, before trying to take the speck out of yours."

Vini smiled too because she remembered reading that in the bible, though she couldn't quite remember where.

"It's in both Matthew and Luke," her pastor told her.

"I'll look it up when I get home," she replied.

As Vini was rising to leave his office, Pastor Meyer pointed to a small table by the door, saying, "By the way, a feng shui fountain."

"Oh, that's right," Vini said, remembering having read that fountains were considered to be good feng shui design elements.

"And it needs to be on that side of the door, for some reason," he added. "I forget why. My wife is a big feng shui fan, and she put it there. She decorates the office, you see."

Vini smiled, nodding. As she shook Pastor Meyer's hand, he finished with, "And our house faces south, which is supposed to mean good luck."

Happily hanging the wind chimes on the back porch when she got home from talking to Pastor Meyer, Vini resolved to pray for Aunt Carol, that she might indeed take the log out of her eye and gain greater understanding, hopefully before criticizing someone again that harshly.

Funny how listening to the church bells brought all of that back, Vini thought. She could also faintly hear the porch wind chimes, as she again settled in to reading more in her borrowed books.

Later, thinking about Aunt Carol again, Vini realized that her pastor had been more than correct about the log thing. In fact, as Vini thought about her aunt's jewelry collection, she realized that Aunt Carol more than adored her jewelry; in fact, it was actually an obsession. Despite the fact that Uncle Tim and Aunt Carol always seemed to have money troubles, Vini's aunt bought new quality jewelry each month, to add to what had been handed down to her from her mother and grandmother. Vini knew that when her aunt and uncle had built their house, they had a special safe installed to hold all of her aunt's jewelry. Aunt Carol also bought new RareBears, collectible stuffed animals that came in many more varieties of creatures than just bears, each week. And she didn't just collect the standard sizes; she bought all of the RareBears Minis and Maxis too. In thinking about these things, Vini couldn't believe that her aunt had equated a set of wind chimes with idolatry, and she felt she had to pray for her again, very hard, that Aunt Carol might recognize her own shortcomings, rather than focusing on what she considered to be the faults in others.

Though Vini cared about and loved her aunt, she had never really liked her because of an incident that had happened when Vini was eleven. Sharing something very private and secret with Aunt Carol, Vini felt very hurt and betrayed when her aunt immediately turned around and shared the information with Vini's mother. "I just thought your mother should know," Aunt Carol said, somewhat flippantly, and in a superior tone.

Not only was Vini very hurt by this, she never trusted her aunt again; and it took her a long time to figure out why Aunt Carol had betrayed her confidence, which was mainly in order to get on Vini's mother's good side, and attempt to form a closer alliance with her. Additionally, it had simply made Aunt Carol feel superior to have that kind of power over another person.

Vini had forgiven her aunt, but she certainly would never share secrets with her again, nor would she be heeding her advice in the future, unless of course Aunt Carol somehow managed take the log out of her eye first, which Vini thought unlikely to happen. She had

forgiven the betrayal not only because her aunt was part of her family, but because it was the right thing to do. *God expects us to forgive other human beings when they hurt us*, Vini reasoned. *After all, nobody's perfect*. She was however glad that her aunt and uncle lived some distance away, so that she only had to see them on certain holidays and when they might be passing through the area in their travels, which had been the case back in April.

Vini was also very glad that she had reminded herself as to what Pastor Meyer had said about making other things more important than God because she suddenly realized that she had been doing far more reading up on unicorns than she had reading in the bible lately. She certainly didn't want to let her project become more important than God, especially when the whole intent of it was to bring some good back into the world, which was completely God's domain. In fact, Vini knew that nothing truly good was ever achieved in the world without God being at the center of it.

On Sunday, after church and lunch, Vini again settled in to read in her bedroom, but this time she read the *Holy Bible*. Using a study guide she had received during one of her youth group meetings, she studied key passages and took a few reminder notes. The focus of the group discussion had been on the fallen state of the world. However, the youth pastor had done a very good job of lifting the spirits of the group, using examples in the bible of how we can't lose hope, even in troubling times, because God is on our side and is making everything in our lives work together for good, even the trials. The story of Joseph in Genesis was a particularly good example. For all of the trials Joseph faced, God definitely worked everything out for good.

Finding and reading the "log" and "speck" passages in both Matthew and Luke, Vini sought out more of Jesus' teachings in the gospels, and it made her feel very good to read His words.

Jesus is the bright spot in our dark world, she thought. *He came and conquered the world. And He expects us to follow in His footsteps, even striving to do the same. We need to reach for higher things, things not of the world.*

Preston was remarkably quiet on this Sunday for some reason, so much so that Vini became worried enough to check on him. He was in his bedroom, sorting through and reading some of his comic books, and

dreaming about being a superhero. This was typical Preston, just slightly odd today because he was Preston without all of the noise.

Maybe he's growing up, Vini hoped, sauntering back to her own room.

After dinner, Vini sat on the back porch for a while, to listen to the wind chimes and enjoy the cool breezes that came with the cooling of the day. She felt less worried than usual, actually peaceful inside, and she reasoned this was likely due to the fact that she had managed to spend a good amount of time during the day with God, in prayer and in reading the bible. Happy about her life in general, and in particular about her current project, Vini found herself looking forward to going to work in the morning.

Unfortunately, her peace wasn't destined to last because, after going back into the house, she happened to hear a television news report of a local elderly man attacked by a gang of teens. Like Mrs. Doyle, he too ended up in the hospital. The news also mentioned that more area seniors were arming themselves. However, many people felt this was not all that effective and could be actually be detrimental since criminals were often stronger and more numerous than their victims, and could simply take a knife or a gun away from their targets.

Though she prayed once more before bedtime, in again thinking about Mrs. Doyle, and in worry for the safety of her grandparents, Vini slept poorly.

On the walk to work the next morning, she found her mind still hashing out this issue, in particular, what might be done to protect people from this type of crime. She smiled in thinking about something Preston had said the previous evening. "We need a few superheroes to set things to right—to put these criminals in their places, and make them shake in their boots."

Since this somewhat mirrored Vini's own idea of finding a unicorn with magical powers, Vini found herself admiring Preston. Despite being annoying at times, he certainly had good thoughts and intentions. He was also braver than Vini, not only in things like not being afraid to jump from the high diving board at the pool, but also in not being afraid to speak out for things he believed in. Vini hated to admit it, but she felt sure Preston would have stuck up for Boyd at school, at least would have spoken out, and might even have helped him distribute his Easter

eggs, unlike Vini, who had been too shy and afraid to speak, let alone take action.

Again thinking about what might be done to help with the problem of seniors being attacked, Vini wondered why Mrs. Doyle didn't have a security system at her home. Of course, this wouldn't help with personal security when out and about, but it might help make her feel safe at home. *Maybe she doesn't like all the new gadgets, or technology in general*, Vini pondered. Indeed, Mrs. Doyle didn't have a computer, at least not one that Vini had seen, anyway. Other than the attic and basement spaces, Vini had pretty much seen the whole house and its contents. *Unless she has a laptop in a cabinet or drawer somewhere*, Vini thought, *I don't think she has a computer*. This seemed odd to Vini because even her grandparents had computers. Even odder was the thought that Mrs. Doyle seemed to be doing just fine without one, and that maybe there really was something to the idea that the old ways of living, with less new-fangled gadgets, were better.

Vini knew that various advancements in the world had dramatically improved certain aspects of life, in particular, many that had occurred in somewhat recent years. Her parents and grandparents often spoke about this. Microwaves saved so much time, and energy, over ovens and stovetop burners for certain types of heating and cooking. Computers were definitely an improvement over typewriters. Phones becoming portable and widely available had provided for more efficiency, safety, and even personal sharing. Medical improvements were certainly saving lives, as were safety improvements to cars, in the form of things like airbags and better tires.

However, when thinking about certain conveniences, though Vini would not particularly have wanted to live without them, she thought some of them might not be all that good, and that human beings might be better off if they had never been invented. For example, with the help of things like dishwashers, garage door openers, microwaves, and clothes dryers, many people had become less active, basically lazier, and this had led to health problems.

Passing Mr. Galloway's house and admiring several tulip beds along the sidewalk, Vini continued to ponder the issue that things considered to be improvements might not necessarily be good for people.

Computers and phones, in particular their connection to social media, had led to people not communicating with one another face to face much anymore, and had led to a free-for-all of bashing of others online. Horrible, ugly things were published about people that never would have been acceptable before. Vini was particularly surprised by what people felt they should be allowed to say, for example, when doing movie, music, and book reviews online. Horrible bashing of actors, musicians, and writers occurred that Vini felt could lead some people experiencing the bashing into depression and suicide. *They allow this kind of expression all over the internet*, Vini marveled, *but people aren't allowed to give out bible verses in school. Incredible!* This type of free speech, unchecked, often encouraged even very young people to say horribly abusive and ugly things about one another online, which then often caused retaliation, leading to what seemed to be an unending cycle of bitterness, meanness, and even hatred.

As far as medical advances, although they were nice, it often seemed only people who could afford the high cost of them were truly benefitting. It also seemed (to Vini at least) that scientists and other brainy people were not coming up with as many new things to tackle problems such as poverty and disease as they really should, especially in relation to how things such as communication and entertainment in the world were advancing. People were always inventing new ways to communicate, which was odd because very few human beings seemed to have much of anything truly important to say. And while people were constantly inventing new ways to entertain themselves, it seemed almost nothing was being done to solve the big problems of the world, like how to get clean water to remote places, or how to create jobs, or even how to cure diseases that probably should already have cures by now.

This line of thinking led Vini to another thought that was equally disturbing. For all of the strides human beings were making in designing new things, where were the improvements to the human beings themselves? If devices and gadgets of the world were constantly being improved, surely human beings were meant to improve as well. If people themselves didn't change, the situations and bad things would never change. Then, even the mightiest efforts of those on the side of good would never be enough to conquer evil and make a difference,

which was perhaps why so many people simply lived a life of endurance and drudgery, while looking forward to the next life, eternal life. *But we have to at least try to make things better while we're here,* she thought, *even if this is just a temporary home.*

So why haven't people improved? Vini wondered. Human intelligence certainly didn't seem to be getting better. And what about improvements like more caring and more kindness, or less greed and less pride? If anything, it seemed undesirable traits and habits were getting worse, with desirable ones falling into the shadows.

Why weren't more people putting their time into solving big problems, inventing more worthwhile things, and doing medical research? Instead, it seemed even brilliant people, of genius levels, were watching movies and spending much of their time on social media—complaining, admiring, commenting, or whatever—but not really doing anything, other than possibly making themselves feel better about living in such a crappy world.

Given the time devoted to participating in social media, it was especially odd how some people weren't at all paying close attention to things going on within their own families, even those on their lists of friends and connections. But, then, how could they truly connect well with the hundreds and sometimes even thousands of people on their lists. No one could have that many true friendships because real relationships required time to develop and maintain.

As if the term “selfie” didn't sum up what was exactly wrong with the world of today, with many people being flat-out selfish, even under the guise of doing good things, which they tended to do mainly for show, in order to gain admiration from others for having done them.

Vini's mother belonged to one of the popular social media websites and had recently mentioned to Vini that one of her former classmates, a woman living in another state, had cancer and was doing poorly. In truth, Vini's mother hadn't stayed very well connected with the woman; but she had been praying for her because the woman was struggling, not only with pain, but with getting to and from doctor's appointments, making meals, cleaning the house, and even with basic things like showering. Her husband was doing as much as he could in caring for her; but he also needed to keep his job, which involved working

overtime, so that he could continue to keep the insurance that was paying for her continued medical treatments.

The sister of the woman with cancer had posted, “Our thoughts and prayers are with you.” But she didn’t go to see her sister, who actually lived nearby, because she was busy with other things, for starters, posting six selfies, two pictures of a dog, and a link to the new shoe-buying site she had just joined, not to mention ordering her first two pairs of shoes. Then she had to make cupcakes for her older daughter’s cheerleading meeting and take her son to lacrosse practice. For that particular week, the busy woman spent less than ten seconds in thought of her sister, and she did not pray for her. She intended to, but forgot. She did spend fifteen hours of the week online and another eight making a costume for her younger daughter to wear to a party. A simpler costume would have only taken two hours to make, but the simpler one wouldn’t do because the outfit was for a competition, which needed to be won. Plus, the pictures were going to be posted online.

Though the busy woman attended church with her family, she still forgot to pray for her sister. She did, however, spend two hours getting herself and her children ready for church because there was going to be a pot-luck mixer afterwards, and she wanted to make sure that they all looked good for the pictures that she was planning to post online later. After the church function, she would be meeting with the contractor she had hired to replace her outdated kitchen cabinets and countertops, which were actually still completely functional but which were eleven years old. Since they weren’t the latest things, and weren’t at all on trend, she wanted them replaced.

The busy woman’s online comment about “thoughts and prayers” got about fifty approval votes, though zero prayers were actually involved, the woman herself having not said a sincere prayer, one actually heard by God, in over two years. However, the album of eight pictures of her daughter wearing the winning costume got nearly two hundred approval votes, which made her feel that her time had been very well spent. And she would spend all of her days feeling this way, that every ounce of the time and energy spent on her daughter in preparing her to be beautiful, talented, and well liked was truly a good investment. Indeed, when the same daughter won a national beauty

pageant eighteen years later, the busy mother couldn't be prouder of her.

Thankfully, someone did help the busy woman's sister, a neighbor, who came over to cook, clean, and drive her to and from several doctor's appointments. This was also a busy person, who worked fulltime, but who didn't own a computer and therefore didn't spend a lot of time online doing things that didn't make much of a difference in the world. She did, however, make a huge difference in the lives of her neighbors, in being able to make the last days of the sick woman more comfortable and slightly less stressful for her husband.

When the woman with cancer passed away, her sister did make the time to attend the funeral, and she wondered at how old and thin her dead sister looked in the casket, not at all the way she remembered her from their time growing up, and from the pictures of their youth she would later post online in order to get sympathy from her friends, and to make herself feel better about not having made the time to visit her sister, even when she was nearing the end.

Vini, of course, didn't know any of these details. However, if she had, nothing about the situation would have particularly surprised her, because she knew that the world, in actuality, was pretty dark and horrible, even with the bling and brightness people tried to add to it, which were not a true shine, but which actually provided a false light, in doing nothing but mirroring darkness disguised as light. In fact, most of the bright and shiny things brought into the world to make the lives of human beings more fun and comfortable were simply acting like mirrors, placed in front of something horrible that was made up to look like something good because of the ornamentation added to it.

However, even with the world in its current state of darkness, Vini had hope because she knew that she had started on a path that, if she managed to stay on course, could truly bring light back into the world to help fight the darkness.

Entering the side gate of Mrs. Doyle's estate, and winding her way along the path to the back door of the mansion, while thinking wonderful thoughts about finding unicorns, Vini was surprised when a set of wind chimes that she hadn't noticed before hanging in a peach tree suddenly began singing to her, an actual song that was rhythmic in its tinkling and not just random chinking and ringing. She was

surprised not only by the musicality, which was a lot like the sound of the voices of about twenty songbirds put into a ballad, but also because there was no breeze, not even the slightest whisper of a waft.

Only briefly confused, Vini smiled because she recognized God speaking to her through the chimes, as though confirming her thoughts and giving His approval, and she suddenly felt settled and peaceful again, and looking forward to having a good week both working at the mansion and working more on her project.

Chapter Five

Tapestries and Wind

By lunchtime, Vini had finally made her way down to the floors of the whole house.

When tackling the floors in the afternoon, she decided to start on the third floor in order to still follow the top-to-bottom principle of cleaning. She was glad she had done some sweeping along the way in her housework so far because it meant that most of the floor surfaces were not all that dirty. After vacuuming the larger rugs, and shaking out smaller ones on various balconies, she was able to do a fairly quick sweep of the hardwood surfaces, followed by a dust mopping which got the tinier bits of dirt, dust bunnies, and other whatnots. Since it was nearly two o'clock when she finished on the top floor, Vini decided to save the rest of the chore for the next day.

After doing the bottom two floors on Tuesday morning, Vini had lunch with Mrs. Doyle in the kitchen. While enjoying turkey sandwiches, Mrs. Doyle said, "Maybe you can still come on weekends in the fall, after Violet comes back; that is, if you decide you like it here and want to keep working part time. Even before Violet left, I was thinking about hiring some help for her because I want her to be able to have time off if she wants it, or needs it. She's a good girl."

Vini was nodding as she chewed. She would love to have a part-time job while going to school.

"Violet is a distant cousin," Mrs. Doyle went on, "third or fourth. I never much cared for genealogy, so I don't often get the details right."

After polishing off the sandwiches and a couple of juicy pears, they decided to have ice cream floats.

"How about some whipped cream on top," Mrs. Doyle spryly suggested, retrieving a huge bowl of freshly whipped cream from the fridge. Vini had never seen so much whipped cream in one bowl before. Mrs. Doyle had been busy in the kitchen all morning, or at least her mixer had been busy. In truth, she was making a cake for Mr.

Corrigan's birthday, a black forest cake that was going to have about twelve layers by the looks of it.

Eyeing the conservative spoonful of whipped cream Vini had placed into her glass, Mrs. Doyle told her, "Oh, put on a big ole glollop."

"A what?" Vini asked.

"A glollop, a cross between a glob and a dollop, in other words a really big dollop, or two, if you want. There's no shortage of cream, that's for sure."

After their treat, Mrs. Doyle asked if Vini would help her assemble the cake. "It's a little too hard for me to cut the layers with a cast on my arm."

With Mrs. Doyle instructing, Vini cut each of the four round cake layers in half lengthwise with a long serrated knife. She had seen her mother do this before, but had never done it herself. The task turned out to be a lot of fun because it actually wasn't as hard as she had imagined it might be.

Next, for each of the thin cake layers stacked onto a large plate, Mrs. Doyle drizzled on some kind of fancy cherry liqueur, before having Vini pile on an even fancier pie filling made with extremely dark cherries, which was then topped with what seemed like a mountain of the decadent whipped cream before the next cake layer was added.

While they were working, Mrs. Doyle told Vini that her mother had called to check on her. "I told her you were doing a good job, and that you were safe. I think she was worried because this is a first job for you. She said you hadn't done any babysitting or anything like that yet. I told her I don't need a babysitter, but I do need an extra arm which, fortunately, you have two of and with which you are doing just fine by the way."

"She told me to be careful with breakables," Vini stated. "If you don't think I'm being careful enough, just let me know."

"You're doing just fine, don't worry," Mrs. Doyle assured her. "And you might break something. I break things sometimes. If you do, it will be okay; accidents happen. And it's people that are important, not things."

With their excellent teamwork, the black forest cake was fully assembled in about twenty-five minutes, reaching well over a foot high

by Vini's estimation. Indeed, other than wedding cakes, she had never seen a cake this tall before.

Being super careful, Vini managed to move it safely from the kitchen counter to the refrigerator, whereupon, Mrs. Doyle told her, "Mrs. Corrigan isn't coming until tonight, so I'll save you a piece for tomorrow."

At Mrs. Doyle's urging, Vini made a good job of licking the spoons and bowls that had held the pie filling and whipped cream, before rinsing and placing them into the dishwasher.

"Well, I think I'll sweep the porches and balconies this afternoon," Vini said, "and wipe down the patio chairs and tables."

"I have a better idea," Mrs. Doyle replied. "Take a break for the afternoon instead. You can sweep porches tomorrow. Maybe get outside and enjoy the rest of the day. If don't feel like going home yet, you could wander the gardens for a while."

Vini had to admit this sounded like a good idea.

"Or explore in the library," Mrs. Doyle added. "With so many books, it might take a while to get to know the library. Or just read if you want. Now that we're fairly caught up, there's no hurry."

Mrs. Doyle was right; they were fairly caught up, except for the attic and basement, which Mrs. Doyle maintained could wait for a bit. Plus, excepting the week Vini would be going to camp, she did have the whole summer in which to clean.

"And you can read here anytime, and stay late if you want," Mrs. Doyle further offered. "You can use the parlor, the gardens, the spare bedrooms—they're all pretty nice for reading in. I usually only have the TV on in the living room, so it shouldn't disturb you too much."

"You know, I might take you up on that sometime," Vini replied. "It would be nice to get away from my brother for a while."

"Yes, boys can be noisy and distracting," Mrs. Doyle said with a smile, "not to mention annoying in other ways too. I had two brothers myself, both passed on now. I was the youngest of four children. My sister still lives, in Las Vegas, if you can imagine it. I used to picture Annabelle always at the slot machines, but I went for a visit a couple of years back and it turns out that poker is her thing. She's pretty good, even at her age, which is...eighty-three, yes, that's it, since I'll be eighty-one in November. She's two years and five months older."

Oops, Vini thought, feeling a little guilty. I actually thought Mrs. Doyle was even older. That's not a good thing, since most women prefer people to think they are younger than they are. But in truth, for those destined to have lots of wrinkles and pure white hair, like Mrs. Doyle, it was often difficult for anyone to tell one ten years from the next as far as guessing their ages.

“That reminds me,” Mrs. Doyle added, jumping up from the kitchen stool, “I’ll need to get a card for her birthday next month.”

After making a note about the card on the shopping list on the refrigerator, Mrs. Doyle headed off to the parlor. “My arm’s hurting a little, time for a nap. I’ll see you tomorrow,” she threw over her shoulder.

Vini did explore the library in the afternoon, for nearly two hours, eagerly taking everything in. In addition to books, fancy furniture, and plenty of antiques such as the weapons and armor, the library housed several cabinets and cases full of maps, artifacts, and multitudes of curios, quite a few of which Vini had no idea what their functions might be. Though some of the collectibles appeared to be simply decorative, she felt certain many of them had to have some sort of purpose. The library also held two beautiful tapestries, which Vini studied for quite some time, one featuring an elaborate banquet with lords and ladies dressed in colorful finery, and the other displaying an exquisite English garden in full summer bloom. An enormous antique globe set on a pedestal occupied the exact center of the room.

After exploring, and selecting two more books to borrow, Vini sat on a bench in the garden to read for a half hour or so, until a somewhat stiff wind started to kick up, at which point, she decided to head home. The walk home turned out to be rather fun for Vini because, although the wind was somewhat forceful, the direction of it ended up being a perfect tailwind, and she almost felt like she was being scooted and carried along. And since this was a summer wind, there was no unpleasantly-cold bite to it; instead, it felt more like an embrace.

Later, after helping her mother in the kitchen, she took a stroll in the back yard where she pulled a few weeds from a corner flower bed while overhearing her neighbor again yelling at his son. While the day had been fairly bright and wonderful so far, all of a sudden, in hearing the harsh words, Vini felt defeated. Yanking a few more weeds before

heading inside, she sighed. How easily a nice day was spoiled, in her mind, anyway.

Also, for some reason, she couldn't stop thinking about Mrs. Doyle being mugged, and about a few other bad things she had heard about recently, such as a terrorist school massacre in another country and a home-invasion robbery and murder that had taken place only about thirty miles from Vini's home. These events, of course, made her feel very sad, and somewhat helpless.

The previous Sunday's church sermon had been about persevering in this fallen world. Pastor Kaufman had gone into great detail as to how he felt the world had fallen. What struck Vini the most was his description of how even churches were compromising to conform to the world. Many were picking and choosing from the bible, giving in to trends and pressure from society, and even twisting God's Word to allow more and more leeway in areas of wrong. Vini also specifically remembered her pastor stressing how bad it was that they had taken religion out of schools, and out of government principles, even though our government had been founded on religious principles.

With no morals, no solid rules, and no other good foundation to go by, there was nothing really solid to base anything on, which had given rise to a free-for-all and anything-goes mentality, which basically equated to nothing better than anarchy. People were bending and bending—rules, laws, beliefs—so that even things that were truly bad for families, societies, and individuals were now considered okay.

The pastor had ended the sermon with a preview of the Wednesday evening's lesson, "How Far Can We Fall?" and had added a warning that he would be presenting a pretty dark picture not only of what he felt the world could turn into, but also of what he felt God might do in response, and what He was already doing, such as withdrawing His protection in the form of allowing more devastating storms and more widespread disease. "If we're not willing to follow His rules, why should He protect us?" Sadly, this meant even good people would be doomed to perish, along with evil ones, since a massive hurricane or tornado couldn't simply pick and choose certain households it might hit in a densely-populated area.

However, despite the doom and gloom of these truths and predictions, Vini truly believed that God would help her find a unicorn,

if He believed her quest to be admirable, which she couldn't imagine why He would not. Her intentions were good, and she wasn't doing anything that contradicted His Word. She also didn't want anything for herself, not riches or glory, only to find something to help mankind battle evil. But it was so hard to be brave in this world, and especially hard for quiet people.

Having had the night to sleep on all of her thoughts, Vini said a prayer on Wednesday morning before setting off for work.

Dear God,

There are probably lots of good people in the world who might want to help. But good tends to be quiet. Please help me be brave enough to carry through with what I know I must do to bring some good to the world and truly make a difference. If I'm not meant to do some good and make a difference, I don't know why else I'm here. Please guide me, and help me to be strong. Amen.

On the walk to work, Vini continued to think on this issue. *I sometimes think that if I just had some sort of helper, I could be strong and brave.* God, of course, was the Ultimate Helper. And even though Vini knew He was always with her, He wasn't with her in the same sense as something concrete and in the flesh, like a family member, or a pet, or friend from school.

After sweeping all of the porches and balconies, and wiping down the outdoor furniture, Vini made her way to the library to take a break. In exploring, she had discovered a whole shelf of bibles, and she found herself very interested in comparing the different versions. She looked up Psalm 91 first, one of her favorites, not only because it was so uplifting, but also because it made her feel extremely protected, and almost fearless.

After reading Psalm 91 in two different bibles, Vini looked up another favorite, Psalm 27, and did the same before saying a short prayer of thanks to God for the beautiful words, after which, she left the library to head up to the attic to see the condition and gauge what needed to be done, in order to begin making an attic-cleaning plan in her mind.

On the way up, she noticed that the stair railings, which she hadn't thought to dust in her initial cleaning of the mansion, not only looked dusty, but also looked as though they could use a healthy dose of furniture polish.

On the third-floor landing, Vini paused to admire a tapestry featuring a wooden cross covered in leafy vines and situated snugly in a small forest clearing. In the background, viewed through several gaps in the trees, a small church serenely sat, surrounded by several quaint cottages tucked into rolling farmlands. The bottom of the tapestry held a bible quote in scrolling letters that Vini remembered as being 2 Samuel 22:35, because it was one she had memorized in Sunday School. "He trains my hands for war, so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze."

Like Psalms 91 and 27, this was also one of Vini's favorites, and she felt even more empowered and happy as she climbed the final flight of stairs to reach the main door to the attic.

Aside from a trap door in the roof and a handful of dormers, Doyle Mansion had three attic entrances, one from the main staircase and two from smaller, side and rear stairs. Since the attic doors were little used, they tended to stick, especially in warmer weather. However, the main one, though somewhat tight, was not too difficult for Vini to open, with the help of a small shoulder shove.

Flipping on a light switch by the door, she stepped into the huge open space, which, except for the sloped areas in line with the many slopes of the roof, had ceilings nearly as high as most rooms in the house. Along with stored furniture, boxes, and other whatnots, the attic contained a fair amount of dust, but no cobwebs, which relieved Vini because she heartily disliked spiders. *Violet must clean up here sometimes because it's not too bad*, she thought. *But I might still wait a bit to tackle this*, she decided, *at least until I've had a look at the basement*.

As she was just turning to leave, she heard a small noise across the room, from behind an old sewing table and a stack of travel trunks, a noise like tiny running footsteps. Deciding it was probably a rat, Vini chose not to investigate, particularly because she hated rats just about as much as she disliked spiders.

In actuality, Pizzo had been taking a peek at Vini, and was ready to fly at her if she mistreated any of Louetta's paintings. Indeed, the puck troll had been periodically watching Vini's cleaning efforts, and would continue to watch her. If she decided to dust the paintings, he was going to make sure that she did so very carefully, or else.

On the way back down the stairs, her mind on getting some polish to do the stair railings, Vini again paused to admire the tapestry on the third-floor landing. In viewing it from higher up, as she was descending the stairs from the attic landing, she had noticed even more of the lovely details, such as the reddish-gold leaves of the treetops and a flock of geese in the cloud-filled sky.

Her gaze lowering once more to the bible quote, Vini stared at the words, first in confusion, then in shock, because they were entirely different than they had been before. "I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze...." (When looking this up later, Vini discovered the quote to be from Isaiah 45:2.)

Continuing to stare at the words, Vini vaguely wondered, *Is this a different tapestry? Am I on a different floor?*

No, her mind firmly answered itself. It's the same cross, the same trees, the same cottages, and the same slightly-worn spot on the left edge. This is definitely the same tapestry.

Slowly backing away and turning, she drifted down the stairs in something of a daze, feeling pretty well spooked, much more so than when she had seen the ghost, or angel, or whatever, in the bedroom mirror. Though the mansion contained many grand tapestries displaying magnificent scenes such as castles, waterfalls, epic battles with swordsmen and horses, banquets, sprawling gardens, dense forests—and even a few smaller wall hangings sporting enchanting subjects like cherubs, nymphs, and fairies—Vini never thought any of them might be magical, or supernatural in any other sort of way.

While polishing the banisters after lunch, a task that took the rest of the day, and thinking about her experiences at the mansion so far, Vini realized that God was speaking to her. *Since it would be rare for someone to actually hear God's voice, this must be one of the ways that He communicates with us, through objects in our surroundings.* Since Vini had been praying a lot lately, and reading the bible, she realized

that she shouldn't be surprised that God was answering her in this way, and encouraging her, with these specific messages.

Though Vini didn't normally go to church on Wednesday evenings, she did attend the "How Far Can We Fall?" lesson, which she found very interesting.

On Thursday, in addition to doing some touch-up cleaning in the main living areas of the house, Vini did get inspired to begin cleaning in the attic. Being even more isolated than normal, particularly from street noises and the sound of distant trains, she found she quite enjoyed the solitude because it gave her even more time to think, the cleaning itself lending to that, of course, since cleaning, in general, didn't require much brain power. What her brain was currently mulling over the most was the sermon from the evening before, which had been somewhat scary to listen to.

Pastor Kaufman had begun by describing in detail the current persecution of Christians, various other attacks on religious freedom, and the general hatred stewing in the world. He had followed with a lot of bible quotes stressing that hellfire is real and that people who reject Jesus Christ will be subject to it, for certain. Even aside from her pastor's words, Vini had already read enough in the bible to know that this was indeed true. She also felt it in her bones, and even deep in her soul. Next, the sermon focused on the worsening of natural disasters in the world—their devastating effects, with more happening that were more severe, as well the fact that they were occurring at a faster rate than those of the past—and how this was evidence that God was lowering His hedge of protection. He didn't cause the disasters, but He was allowing them. This also was something that had a real ring of truth to it for Vini, just about as clear as the wedding bells had been. Though it made her very sad, and she wanted to deny it, she knew it to be true, without a doubt. Pastor Kaufman finished by stating that even though this was terrible, some suffering had to be expected, because God needed to get our attention; and He expected people to learn something from this, specifically, not to rebel against Him.

At home after the service, Vini felt weary just thinking about what had been said, though she admitted that people definitely needed to hear it. Reading the bible and praying helped to dispel some of the depressing thoughts weighing her down. However, even with this

fortification, she felt very much like she needed to escape for the rest of the evening. Picking up one of the books she had borrowed from Mrs. Doyle, she was surprised to discover a chapter expounding a theory that unicorns could be a cure for depression.

How could they be? Vini wondered. That is such a strange idea.

However, even as she thought how oddball the notion seemed, she realized that it too had a ring of truth to it.

Reading on, into what seemed to be about fifty confusing explanatory paragraphs, she had great difficulty grasping the concepts, such as that hope in some sort of physical form, carried in the unicorn's horn, could saturate us, curing us from many illnesses, including depression. A little further along in the chapter, the horn simply became something that could pierce Satan's influence on us, and the world, like the bursting of a bubble, while at the same time fortifying our bondage and spurring us on into hope, assurance, clear thinking, energy, and action. Vini was very confused by the word "bondage" in this context because she couldn't understand how being in bondage could be a good thing, but a mention of "prisoners of hope" from the bible prompted her to look up Zechariah 9:12. "Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double."

Vini chewed on her lip as her brain tried to work this quote out.

The "stronghold" is a place of refuge, she decided. We are held strong by Christ. So even if it's compared to the bondage of being in a prison, it's a good thing, not bad. We have surrendered to Him. He does keep and hold us. Being captive to Christ is a very good thing.

And "restore to you double" means a reward.

But I don't want a reward. I already have the reward of eternal life. I just want to bring more light into the world, and battle down the darkness that is taking hold of us.

In reading more of the bible passage in context, she felt that being "free from the waterless pit" probably meant escape from eternal condemnation, hell, and possibly from Satan's influences in general.

Going back to the borrowed book, and reading a bit more, she still couldn't see how a unicorn could truly battle depression, especially since the writer gave no indication as to how someone might actually find a unicorn. *This doesn't seem like a very practical book, Vini*

decided. However, she didn't dismiss the theory as unimportant because there was something about it that was speaking to her—again, the ring of truth. She just couldn't understand, at this point, exactly what was true about it, or how it might be applied to her project. She felt the answer was probably hiding somewhere in the book, like a mystery, or like how all the unicorns might be hiding in the part of our brain that we don't use, according to Mrs. Doyle. Making a couple of notes in her binder, she thought, *Maybe I'll come back to this later, when I have more time to read the whole book.* (Though she might have wanted to, Vini recognized that she simply wouldn't have time to read very many whole books while doing her research.)

Thinking more on the theory while changing into her pajamas, Vini reasoned that the book was so old, likely written before they had things like medications for depression, that the writer was probably just engaging in wishful thinking.

The subject of depression was still on Vini's mind the next day in the attic, primarily because she had just heard on the news that the numbers of people (especially young people) being diagnosed with depression were rising, drastically. In fact, studies showed that the number of cases had more than doubled in the last five years. And the suicide rate had risen even more dramatically than that.

According to the newscasters, this was "Astounding!" and they couldn't imagine what might be causing this.

Couldn't they really, Vini pondered, both sadly and scornfully. *They can't imagine what might be causing this; seems more like a case of denial to me.* Indeed, the news never mentioned people's lifestyles, choices, and endless pursuits of wealth, fame, and success. For all of the things people were striving for, with a lot of other people saying that everyone could and should have these things, no wonder people were depressed. *Everybody can't be famous, or wealthy, or even be successful at everything they do. People have to fail sometimes. Except that kids never fail at school anymore; they just get passed, even when they are being lazy.* In recognizing the things contributing to her own depression, Vini felt practically outraged that the news media was choosing to ignore that a specific mentality in the world, along with certain changes, namely changes to schools and governments, were the causes for at least some of the problems. In again thinking about the

situation with Boyd, she again felt incredibly dismayed, and even mad at herself—that she hadn't spoken up and supported him.

Vini also recognized that, in addition to not being challenged much at school, kids today didn't have many chores or other demands on their time, or any real responsibilities, and were easily bored. Then, in trying to fill their time, to be entertained and seek fulfillment, they ended up in trouble, pursuing the wrong things and doing things they might regret later, things that definitely weren't fulfilling and that could even lead to depression.

So they really can't figure this out, Vini thought again, almost angrily. *Incredible! Maybe the news people are under the influence of Satan, and want things to get worse. Instead of telling it like it is, which might sink in to some people, prompting them to make changes, they'd rather ignore problems and mislead people.*

Sighing, she tried to shake off the ugly thoughts, feeling that Satan might be well nearer to *her* right now, in her dark and angry feelings, than to the news people.

In Vini's own situation, she felt certain that God had pulled her out of her depression. She had begun with prayer, and trusting Him to help her. From there, He had led her (through the books she was reading and in her thinking) to an understanding as to what could help her. Vini also felt certain that God had been the One to put the summer job into her life, perhaps speaking to Mrs. Doyle in some way, and that He was further leading her on with regards to her project.

Nothing is too hard for Him, Vini reminded herself. *He can help me. And I believe He will.*

In addition to the messages on the tapestry, God had been speaking to her, and encouraging her, directly from the bible. Sometimes, she would just open the book and her eyes would be drawn like magnets to specific verses. Only the evening before, she had read, "Fear not. I will help you."

Vini murmured, while cleaning, to remind herself of several messages she had received from the bible recently. She personalized the messages, of course, since God truly was speaking to her personally. "He holds my right hand; He is my rear guard; He breaks down doors; He clears a path in front of me." *God does all of this, and more!* Again

talking to herself aloud, she quoted from Psalm 107. “For he shatters the doors of bronze, and he cuts in two the bars of iron.”

Though these messages encouraged her, in truth, Vini felt somewhat small, and lost in the vastness of the world, and in what she felt she was trying to tackle, as far as her project; and she felt some of the natural insecurity that all human beings feel at times. *Is there truly anything I can do to change the world?* Of course, it would be rare for any single human being to change the entire world. Neither could she take on the whole world by herself and win, particularly because the world could be a pretty scary place. *Only Jesus was able to take on the whole world and win.* With this thought, a bible quote popped into her brain, some of Jesus’ words from the Gospel of John. “...be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” Reminding herself that with the help of Jesus she had nothing to fear, another quote, also from the Gospel of John, came to her. “...he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”

The Holy Spirit will help and guide me, Vini firmly told herself, as her brain began making a very definite plan. *I’ll start in my little corner of this big world, and work my way out and up. I’ll take on smaller things first, like I’m training for the big ones. Then, maybe one day, I can take on the whole world.*

Vini knew she had already taken the first step toward this, in fully surrendering to God, giving Him complete control of her life.

In moving a box while dusting, and discovering a tiny stuffed donkey inside, Vini smiled as she remembered something she learned in Sunday School—that God had once spoken through a donkey. The lesson had been about not ignoring the many ways God might be speaking to us, sometimes even through our enemies; and about taking criticism well because, even though the words may be harsh and difficult to hear, there might be a ring of truth to them that could help us to learn and grow.

In the afternoon, while returning scissors to a drawer in a table of the sewing room, Vini eyed a large woven tapestry hanging behind a dressmaker’s manikin. The work featured several woodland creatures frolicking in a copse. Given what had happened the previous day, Vini almost wondered if this tapestry might be about to perform a magical trick of some sort. At first glance, she thought one of the forest

creatures was a lion, because it was furry and golden in color. However, after reorganizing the crowded table drawer to make several items fit better, and moving nearer the tapestry to examine it more closely, Vini discovered that the lion was actually a unicorn. In close scrutiny, it was easy to see why she had gotten confused. While horned, the unicorn was a deep golden color and had mane that resembled a lion, not to mention extremely furry feet with hooves that were shaped very much like large lion paws.

Having a snack in the kitchen with Mrs. Doyle later, Vini mentioned the tapestry, in particular, how she had mistaken the unicorn for a lion.

“In unicorn lore,” Mrs. Doyle began, “they resemble lions as much as they do horses, if not more so. They are more the size of horses than lions, which is probably where some of the confusion lies,” she added, “but they are definitely lion-like. I think the colors are more those of lions; and they might have fur, rather than hair. And who knows what their feet, and teeth, and tails really look like. I mean, who’s really ever gotten that close to a unicorn? Since they move faster than the speed of light, I doubt many people could ever see them clearly, even if they slowed down once in a while.”

Mrs. Doyle had evidently done some research on unicorns herself, it seemed. *Or does she have some first-hand experience with them?* Vini wondered.

Just before going home, Vini went to the library where she returned a couple of borrowed books before reading Psalm 107 in two bibles. After reading, she said a quick prayer. *God, please let me find a unicorn, not for myself, but for the world, to help the world. Thank You for listening, Amen.*

As she was placing a newly-selected book into her backpack, while scanning a shelf to pick another one, Vini’s back was to the French doors to the balcony, which were open. Mrs. Doyle had opened them earlier because the room had felt stuffy. Though the library windows all had plantation shutters, the doors had large drapes as covers, which Mrs. Doyle had left closed.

Suddenly feeling a weird tingling in the nape of her neck, which then began to creep up the back of her skull, Vini turned almost involuntarily to face the balcony doors, whose drapes were billowing,

though there was no breeze outside to stir them. Carefully placing her backpack on a table, she stepped slowly toward the doors, in an odd sort of automatic fashion, which didn't seem completely of her own power, and made her feel as though someone was gently tugging her along on an invisible puppet string. When a sharp and forceful wind abruptly cut through the room behind her, scooting her more quickly toward the balcony, Vini was reminded of the tailwind on her Tuesday walk home, particularly because the wind was not at all cold as one might have expected if a sudden storm were to blow up. Instead, it was warm, feeling much like a snug embrace.

In ordinary circumstances, the wind might have come from an open window, except that no windows of the library were open, and Vini knew this. Even aside from this oddity, she was certain that something out of the ordinary was about to happen. She could just feel it in her bones, and even in her soul.

Sensing the presence of something on the balcony, just beyond the billowing drapes, Vini wondered, *Could it be a unicorn?* Maybe God was already answering her prayer. *Could He be answering me this quickly?*

Why not, He can do anything? Why not a unicorn right outside these doors?

Holding her breath as she reached the doors, Vini threw open the drapes, which revealed something almost unbelievable.

It was not a unicorn, but something even better, if such a thing could possibly exist.

Two horses were standing on the wide balcony, but were unlike any Vini had ever seen. In fact, they were so unlike traditional horses in their appearances that, if she hadn't been expecting something extraordinary, she might have dismissed them as hallucinatory. However, since Vini had never been prone to seeing things, not even in heavy-daydream mode, she didn't feel the need to blink hard, or rub her eyes, or even doubt for a second that the horses were real, and standing right in front of her. In addition to being able to see them, which made it unlikely that she was imagining things, she could very much feel their presence.

They were obviously magical creatures of some sort. With something like the sheen of hummingbirds' feathers, their coats

shimmered with colors that were difficult to describe: earthy colors, but bright as well, holding a glow like sunshine on smooth gemstones, which gave the horses something of a golden look, but not one that could be compared to creatures such as lions and gryphons due to the rainbow of colors within the glow—colors that resembled deep-toned versions of amaranth, turquoise, citrine, and lavender.

Vini knew enough about horses, and animals in general, to know that one was a girl and the other a boy; and since both appeared fairly young and not too large, more the size of large ponies, they probably would have been called a filly and a colt, by horse experts, rather than a mare and a stallion.

Gingerly reaching out to touch the silky-soft nose of the girl, she was completely reassured that the horses were real. Smiling, she slowly withdrew her hand. She didn't want to startle them. Gazing at her with warm golden-brown eyes, the horses seemed to be waiting for something. Suddenly nuzzling her arm and hand, the boy horse seemed to want to be touched too, prompting Vini to stroke his neck, which felt every bit as soft as his companion's nose, and also very warm and almost tingly to the touch.

The mystery as to how the horses came to be on the balcony soon became clear as the girl horse suddenly leapt from the balcony, upwards, soaring off into the sky, leaving a warm gust of air in her wake that not only set the tail and mane of the boy horse into a flurry, but also whipped Vini's hair across her face.

So they can fly, even though they don't have wings. Of course, it's the wind, Vini realized. They somehow use the wind, unless, maybe they're partly made of wind. Though she lost sight of the horse very quickly, Vini thought the movements of the flying creature resembled more of a gentle lope, rather than a full-on gallop. *They're very fast,* she thought, having no idea that the departure was incredibly slow, perhaps the equivalent of a gentle stroll, for a wind horse.

Tulko and Dara. Somehow Vini suddenly knew the horses' names, as though someone had laid this thought onto her brain. *They are brother and sister,* she realized, as this thought also came to her.

Vini was surprised that Tulko didn't follow his sister, but stayed put on the balcony, staring at her. He didn't seem at all afraid of her, or even shy, but instead seemed to be waiting for something.

Vini waited too, unsure as to what she was supposed to do, or what the horse might be expecting her to do.

After what seemed like a rather long time of waiting, which was really only about ninety seconds, Tulko moved a few feet, to a spot where he could give one of the metal patio chairs a nudge with his nose. Snorting, he gave the chair a second nudge, then a third, repositioning it to a point directly beside him.

Again, the horse waited.

When Vini didn't respond, Tulko tossed his head, indicating the chair beside him, which was on the correct side to mount a horse.

As the invitation was clear, Vini approached, somewhat nervous, but also thrilled.

She hadn't done much horse riding, only a couple of times at a nearby stable two summers ago, and had been looking forward to learning more at camp. But even with somewhat limited experience, she knew how to get on a horse. And although there was no stirrup, the chair was just the right height for her to get herself hoisted up, along with the help of handfuls of Tulko's warm and silky mane. In less than five seconds, she was securely seated.

But won't I need a saddle?

Almost instantly, as if in answer to her mind's question, she found that her legs seemed almost glued to the horse, as though gripping a super-soft saddle with no effort at all.

Taking off from the balcony, Tulko rose nearly straight up, at a speed that seemed about ten times faster than any elevator Vini had ever been in, to about two hundred feet above the mansion. With flying being an unfamiliar activity for her, and with her breath taken from her by the acceleration, Vini squealed, but more in start than in fright because she was thoroughly exhilarated by the experience.

Unsure if Vini's squeal meant that the ride was too much for her, Tulko dropped back down to the balcony at a speed equal to about half that of his ascent.

Landing next to the chair, the horse stood completely still,

When Vini didn't get off, Tulko rose again, this time more slowly, at about double the speed of a normal elevator—a mere crawl for a wind horse, of course, but Tulko found he didn't mind. He liked Vini. And he was supposed to do this. He didn't mind that he was going to have to

take it somewhat slow at first, while teaching her how to travel with him. Plus, he knew that human beings were somewhat delicate, in comparison to wind horses that is, so he knew that he was going to need to fly gingerly, at least at first.

Though Vini had a good view of her neighborhood from about two hundred feet in the air, due to the many trees and large houses, she couldn't quite see her one-story house situated about a quarter of a mile down the street from Mrs. Doyle's estate. Paloma Drive had once been comprised entirely of large estates. However, on Vini's end of the block, when one house burned down, decades ago, and another on the estate right next to it was not maintained and eventually became abandoned, both properties were sold to a developer who split the land up to make twenty-three lots, upon which smaller houses, mostly single story, were built. Thankfully, despite the widely-varied property values, and the diverse incomes of the residents, the neighborhood was a very pleasant place in which to live, having no noticeable distinction as far as how neighbors treated one another, no matter which type of property, large or small, each called home.

She lost sight of Paloma Drive entirely as Tulko rose higher into and above the clouds. Though it must have been cool this high up, and possibly even cold, Vini felt completely comfortable because the horse and the air surrounding him were warm, but not uncomfortably so because it wasn't anything like what one might experience in sweltering summer heat. Passing through clouds as Tulko headed in a definite direction, which felt westerly, Vini was surprised to feel only a little muggy, and not at all wet.

In viewing her surroundings, the clouds were mostly a blur, which was what Vini might have expected for as fast as they were probably traveling. The sky above, however, looked very different than what she imagined it would look like atop a flying horse, soaring high into the heavens. Instead of blue or dark blue, it was filled with undulating streams of colors bursting with light, like images of the aurora borealis she had seen on television, but moving faster.

Glancing behind her, she saw scrolling streaks of light-filled color trailing Tulko, and dissipating fairly swiftly like rapidly-unraveling ribbons of curly rainbows, but with the colors being incredibly bright and sassy, instead of more subdued like those of traditional rainbows.

She hadn't noticed this when Dara took off. In truth, the celestial imprints of wind horses, in other words, their color trails, didn't appear unless the creatures were moving fairly fast, which was something the horses had been afraid to do when first meeting Vini, because they hadn't wanted to scare her. Looking backwards while traveling made her somewhat dizzy, so she looked forwards instead.

In what seemed only to be about five minutes after leaving the balcony, the flying pair arrived at a place that looked like pictures Vini had seen of Hawaii, with lush rainforest valleys, roaring waterfalls, multitudes of flowering plants, mist-shrouded volcanoes, glittering ocean expanses, and other such wondrous sights, some of which were so beautiful that they literally took her breath away. (But perhaps her breathlessness was due to the excitement of riding on an enchanted flying horse, or because they had been traveling at way more than even breakneck magical speed.)

After a quick tour of three large islands, Tulko took Vini to see several desert landscapes that she imagined might belong to Utah and Arizona, before they traveled to see a range of mountains that she thought were probably situated in Oregon and Washington.

Less than forty minutes after departing the mansion, Tulko gently set down on the balcony outside the French doors to the library, whereupon, Vini dropped from his back, giving him a good long pet and pat, as a thank you for the lovely adventure. Whinnying much like a real horse as he enjoyed the attention, Tulko nuzzled Vini's neck and shoulder before unexpectedly bolting from the balcony, leaving only a blur of azure-tinged peach, viridian, and gold colors behind him.

Entering the library, Vini discovered Mrs. Doyle staring out the open French doors at the departing horse's colorful streak, with her mouth open. (Her presence had been what had caused Tulko to bolt.)

Her mouth closing fairly quickly, Mrs. Doyle said, "I'm not really all that surprised. Or, I shouldn't be surprised, not with the troll and that thing living in the shed, whatever it is." With a small shrug, which seemed to signify that it was perfectly acceptable (and possibly even a common event) for a magical horse being petted by her housekeeper to leap from one of her balconies, she turned to leave while saying, "Well, I'm off to take a nap."

Though Mrs. Doyle did not seem all that surprised, Vini was, from everything that had occurred since she first felt the presence of the horses on the balcony, so much so that she found her legs to be a little shaky. Sitting down at one of the library tables, she thought, *How could anyone take a nap after seeing something like this for the first time?!*

And, what troll?!

She would have to wait to ask, because didn't want to disturb Mrs. Doyle's nap. Vini was always careful about naptimes at the mansion, feeling that the elderly woman probably needed a lot of rest.

Retrieving her backpack, Vini meandered home in something of a haze, trying to take in all that had happened in just one short afternoon.

After dinner, she practiced sword fighting with Preston in the backyard. They used safe wooden swords made by their father for this type of play. Vini usually didn't go for things like this, since she preferred activities like reading, puzzles, and board games. However, one of Preston's neighborhood friends had moved over Christmas, and another friend from down the street was grounded, so Preston hadn't really had anyone to play rambunctiously with lately.

Oddly enough, the swordplay turned out to be almost as much fun as riding the flying horse, and Vini found she enjoyed spending time with her brother, in addition to getting plenty of fresh air and exercise.

Chapter Six

Evening Escapades

At work on Friday morning, after giving the bathrooms a thorough cleaning, Vini made her way to the parlor to enjoy a fancy teatime with Mrs. Doyle, who had all kinds of goodies laid out on the coffee table for them, as well as some of her best china and linen napkins. The spread consisted of both peach and raspberry tea, along with an assortment of fruit scones, petit fours, cheese biscuits, filled cookies, and butter mints.

In discussing the events of the previous afternoon, Vini told Mrs. Doyle, “I’ve never heard of or seen anything like that before, have you?”

“No,” Mrs. Doyle answered, shaking her head. “It was certainly nothing like Pegasus.”

“There were two horses for sure that I saw,” Vini stated, “but I think there might even be more than that. I don’t know why I think that; it just seems like it should be.”

“Well, horses are generally herd animals, and are very social creatures,” Mrs. Doyle replied, “so it would make sense for magical ones to be like that too.”

“I’m not sure what to call them,” Vini pondered, having thought about the issue quite a bit since the encounter. “The only thing that comes to mind is wind horse. They probably have a fancier name than that. But they seem to use wind, or create wind, or are made of wind...I just don’t know.”

“Maybe all three are correct,” Mrs. Doyle answered. “Whatever the case, wind horse sounds like a good name for them. I can’t think of anything better to call them either.”

“I’ve never read anything about them, in any book I’ve read,” Vini said, with wonder in her voice.

“Me neither,” Mrs. Doyle said, with equal wonder, “and I’ve read a lot more books in my lifetime than you have.”

Though the subject of wind horses definitely took center stage in their discussion, Vini remembered to ask Mrs. Doyle about the troll.

“Oh, you’ll meet him soon enough and I don’t want to spoil the surprise,” the woman responded, with something of a wry smile. “He’s out and about and visible quite a lot because he’s not affected by the no-daylight rule common to trolls in storybooks, so I’m sure it won’t be long before you come across him.” Going on, her tone held a bit of mischief. “He’s not dangerous...well, not really, not much anyway. You’ll see soon enough.”

At around two-thirty in the afternoon, when Vini was just leaving work for the day, Tulko landed in the garden, very near the side gate.

Somehow, Vini seemed to know that he wanted to take her for another ride. After tightening the straps of her backpack, with no chair nearby, on something of an odd instinct, she simply grabbed handfuls of his mane and made a jump, as though somehow knowing that she could get up high enough to throw her leg over the horse without the help of a stirrup or chair or anything else. It worked! In a mere instant, it seemed, she was properly seated. But it wasn’t a super-strong bounce in Vini’s legs that had helped her to accomplish this. As she made the jump, with just a slight stamp of his left front hoof, Tulko had raised a small but powerful gust of air to help boost her onto his back.

As the horse rose quickly into the air, Vini began to worry that they might be seen, particularly because she knew that Mr. Galloway often spent long hours keeping watch on the neighborhood from the top floor of his gazebo. However, she would fairly quickly come to realize that she needn’t worry about being seen when out and about in this fashion. In truth, only people standing extremely close to a wind horse could ever see them because the creatures were able to blend in perfectly with their backgrounds, particularly when viewed from below. Indeed, being made of the myriad colors existing in sky, cloud, storm, dawn, dusk, horizon, sunrise, and sunset, the horses were able to meld with pretty much any of their surroundings. Vini was particularly fascinated with the ever-changing and varied hues of coral, tangerine, azure, violet, and charcoal in Tulko’s coat. Of course, being super speedy also served to camouflage the magical horses, as well as their various wind-like movements. This made perfect sense to Vini because, well, who could ever possibly *see* the wind?

Marveling at wind horses being nearly invisible, she didn't think they were mirroring their surroundings. In looking like clouds and the colors of sunset and such, she thought this was just the natural camouflage that God had given them, because they would end up spending so much of their time in the skies.

On this excursion, instead of simply touring various beauties of nature, Tulko seemed to want to show her some of the things he could do. Landing next to an isolated pond fringed with several enormous weeping willow trees, Tulko lightly stamped his feet, flicked his tail, and tossed his head, while gently exhaling a few times. Vini was amazed to discover that his movements and breathing served to rotate, swirl, and twist the swaying willow tendrils into braids, like leafy versions of those worn by people with long hair, but much longer, of course.

Next taking Vini to a meadow, Tulko issued several short snorts of breath from his nostrils, which not only completely flattened the meadow grasses, but also caused several young trees at the edge of the meadow to bend so low that their tops nearly touched the ground. Since Tulko was being gentle, compared to what he was actually capable of, this didn't hurt the grasses or trees, which would shortly bounce back to completely normal; and just like normal wind, this would serve to strengthen the trees. Though he wasn't able to show his full strength to Vini, somehow she knew he was much more powerful, perhaps even capable of raising winds equal to those of small tornados or hurricanes.

Flying to an ocean expanse next, Tulko created a wave in the water, then a whirlpool, then ripples and zigzags, which a pod of dolphins seemed to have great fun playing in. Calling to the hovering horse, they seemed to be saying, "Thank you!" with their squeals, whistles, and squeaks.

Vini too told Tulko, "Thank you," not only for showing her what he could do, but also for the thrilling experience. Vini had never seen dolphins in person before, only on television, and this was truly exciting for her.

Tulko next rose very high, where he decided to have a little fun with clouds, which he rearranged, much like an artist, into many amazing sculptures, though he did so much more quickly than a sculptor of other materials might. He first made an elaborate dragon seemingly with

nothing more than two twitches of his ears, three twists of his body, and one small rear, in order to paw at the air a few times. With what seemed to be similarly-easy motions, accompanied by scrolling lashes of his tail, and a few swirls of locks of mane, he then produced an enormous, squirrel, a bear, three whales, a leaping deer, a wolf, a huge dragonfly, and a line of human figures holding hands.

Vini gasped as Tulko also made a rearing unicorn, because she felt it was a sign, that God was telling her she was on the right path and that He was truly blessing her quest.

“So people think unique cloud formations have been made by accident, or by scientific phenomena,” Vini said aloud, “when they are more likely made from the play of wind horses.”

Tulko tossed his head and whinnied, as if agreeing with her. It had indeed been “play” for him to sculpt the clouds, and he often did this, mimicking things he had seen. Indeed, he had recently seen a bear, and a line of school children holding hands while on a field trip with their teacher. Human beings holding on to one another was a sight that had truly touched him.

As spectacular as all of this was, Vini was surprised to find herself thinking of bath time when she was a little girl, specifically of her mom making soap sculptures out of her sudsy hair—a clown hat, a princess crown, rabbit ears, even a bear and a puppy. Her mother had been a very talented artist in this regard. She now often made sculpted cakes, for fun, her most recent creations being a hedgehog wearing a hat, and a flower pot cake filled with blooms made of marzipan.

Tulko also took Vini to Death Valley, which she recognized not only from pictures, but also from the pressure she felt in her ears when descending. Landing on the valley floor, with only the tiniest of nostril gusts, Tulko slid three boulders about a hundred feet each. The stones left very noticeable smooth curving trails in the dusty landscape.

“Wow!” Vini exclaimed. Not only was the power of the wind horse amazing, she had just discovered the answer to a mystery people had long puzzled over—how boulders in Death Valley sometimes slide around, seemingly on their own, leaving noticeable trails.

As Tulko was taking Vini home, Dara flew alongside them for a bit. Vini thought she also saw several other wind horses off in the distance. Though they were difficult to make out, since she was getting used to

seeing them, she was able to recognize the horses even with their natural camouflage obscuring them.

As Dara whinnied to them, Vini briefly wondered if she was supposed to have picked between the two horses on the balcony, and if Dara might have felt slighted when Vini was more drawn to Tulko. This was not the case. By both instinct and divine direction, Tulko was definitely intended for Vini, as companion and protector, and to some extent teacher. In truth, Tulko had been nervous about meeting Vini for the first time outside the library, and had brought his sister along for support.

As he could sense no one was around to see, instead of returning to Mrs. Doyle's garden, Tulko dropped Vini off in her back yard, which had a privacy fence, fairly well secluding it from onlookers. Again, just by his thoughts laid onto her brain, Vini knew that he was planning to come back for her at nine o'clock in the evening.

At home, pondering everything and somewhat feeling as though she were living in a dream, Vini realized that God had answered her prayer of request for a helper; and what an amazing helper Tulko would turn out to be, so much more than she could have ever imagined she would receive. Now, the big question was, what exactly was she supposed to do that Tulko would be helping her with?

Preston, thankfully, happened to be tucked away in his bedroom just before nine o'clock. After telling her parents, who were at the table in the kitchen playing Yahtzee, that she was planning to read in her bedroom for a while before bedtime, Vini was able to slip out the back door in the den unseen.

She had been right in thinking that wind horses were virtually invisible when seen from afar. A mere moment before Tulko appeared, standing right in front of her, Vini had only observed that a small section of the summer sunset in her view (the wind horse in disguise) seemed to move slightly closer to her.

The sun slipped away entirely as they rose into the air.

Tulko first took Vini on a tour of the lights of several nearby cities, both large and small.

Vini sensed that since this was their first night flight together that Tulko was being very careful, not to go too fast, and not to get her into anything dangerous until she got more used to traveling with him. This

helped Vini to relax. The moon was currently huge, and the stars bright in the nearly cloudless sky, so she could see very well, even in the darkness of night.

As Tulko dropped low to sidle up next to a branch of a huge sycamore tree, Vini found she suddenly knew what she needed to do, as a first task. She would, of course, have some tasks to perform because she couldn't simply fly about in a relaxing manner and never do anything important. Being given such an important helper and companion as a wind horse, she would definitely need to put both her skills and those of the horse to good use. Gingerly picking a frightened kitten from the branch—and “picking” it was because his claws were clinging tightly to the bark and basically had to be pried loose—she cuddled the tiny creature as they again rose slowly over the housetops. Tulko seemed to know exactly where the kitten belonged because they dropped him off at a specific driveway two blocks away.

Next, the flying pair ended up approaching a three-story house in the suburbs where a man was climbing an extremely tall ladder propped against his home, in order to replace a burned-out floodlight bulb. Why he had decided to do this at night was a mystery, because it would have been a much safer chore to perform in daylight. Whatever the reason, he ended up learning a scary lesson when his foot slipped. Being unbalanced, and trying to catch himself on a windowsill, he accidentally caused the ladder to tip, which would have been a disaster had it not been for Vini catching him and steadying the ladder as she and Tulko were slowly drifting by. In the dark, and because Tulko's camouflage abilities extended to his rider, the man who had almost fallen couldn't quite see who or what had helped him. Upon descending the ladder in safety and relief, he simply said a prayer of thank you to God for sending a guardian angel.

In just under an hour from leaving, Tulko was dropping Vini off in her back yard. Their adventure hadn't taken long because of the speed of the wind horse. Slipping back into the den, Vini could hear that her parents were still in the kitchen as she made her way quietly to her bedroom.

Though their first mission had accomplished something, Vini felt she was likely destined to do a lot more. She was right. On their second outing together the next night, they ended up at a tall apartment

building, saving a suicide jumper who found he was unable to fall because an odd and strong wind from below kept him aloft and placed him back on the roof when he first jumped. Another strange wind kept pushing him backwards from the edge when he tried to jump again, several times. At one point, when they were hovering very close to the man, Vini gave him a small shove to keep him away from the edge.

However, determined as he was to do away with himself, the man ran inside to his apartment and retrieved a rope, which he carried downstairs and outside to a park next door to the apartment building. Tossing the rope over a sturdy tree limb, the man dragged a chair from a picnic set in the park over to stand on to tie the rope for hanging. Fastening the noose around his neck, the man then kicked away the chair. Held securely by another strange and strong wind beneath his body, the man was unable to fall. As he struggled without falling, Vini was able to untie the rope from the branch, so that when Tulko released the man, he fell to the ground with a small thud that didn't particularly hurt him. But it did jar him, just enough to make him stop his attempts to kill himself, at least for the time being. Lying on the ground, the man curled himself up, hugging his knees, weeping as he shook his head. "I can't even do this right!" he sobbed out.

Though Vini and Tulko were planning to keep watch for a while, to see if the man tried to do anything else to harm himself, they wouldn't particularly need to because one of the man's neighbors had observed through her windows what was happening in the park and had already called the police, who would be arriving shortly to take the man to a hospital so that doctors and counselors could help him. And the neighbor had already made her way outside, and was running toward the man, intent on staying with him until the police arrived.

From their position above the park, noting that the man was in safe hands, Vini and Tulko quietly departed.

After returning home from the outing, though Vini felt relieved that they had prevented a suicide, she also felt extremely somber, almost to the point of being depressed. *How many more people were out there killing themselves that we didn't save?* she wondered. *How sad that this is what the world has become.*

Of course, Vini couldn't know this, but the man they saved was one who had been told, from even his youngest years—by family, friends,

teachers, counselors, and all sorts of media—that he needed to be materially wealthy, highly educated, and marry a woman who looked like a supermodel to be truly successful and happy. Unfortunately, he had flunked out of college, mainly because it was a lot harder than high school and he hadn't been very well prepared for it by high school, or other training and experiences. He had also failed in a recent business venture and was now in a lot of debt because of it. The man also hadn't yet been able to attract the type of women he deemed beautiful, not even one, in all of his twenty-seven years so far. What he had really wanted to do with his life, early on, was make furniture. And he would have been really good at it, had it not been for other people pushing and pulling him in other directions, and telling him that becoming a furniture maker would be a loser's future, not his. Vini also couldn't and wouldn't know that the man would succeed in committing suicide two years later, having never found any true happiness in his life and pursuits so far. He died without a fancy car or large house or other material things that people were always telling him would signify that he was successful. But perhaps the most notable thing absent from his life was God, which would have been the answer to all of his problems, if he hadn't completely and bitterly rejected Him so many times over the years.

Tulko was picking her up again for a Sunday evening outing. Thinking about everything that had happened in the last two evenings, as she waited for him, she absentmindedly picked up (from a bench on the porch) one of the wooden swords she and her brother had recently been playing with. Forgetting to put it down when hopping aboard Tulko, she laid it across her lap. Becoming used to air riding, which was a lot easier than riding a regular horse because Tulko's aura and powers somehow helped to hold her in place, she didn't particular need to use her hands, though she did usually keep one hand on her friend's neck, as a precaution, so that she could maintain her balance in case Tulko unexpectedly changed speed or direction for some reason. With her hands free most of the time, she found she could carry items with her easily, if she wished. This had been true the evening before too when she picked up a couple of pretty stones, for use as a paperweight and a doorstop, from a lakeshore they visited briefly on the way home.

Only about five miles from Vini's home, an elderly man was walking across a parking lot to his car from a bowling alley, lugging his heavy bowling bag along. The parking lot was a large one, servicing several adjoining businesses in addition to the bowling alley, including an import pottery outlet and a skating center that were both currently closed for the night. Since the man had arrived in the afternoon, to do some shopping at the pottery outlet before an evening of fun at the bowling alley, he had parked pretty far out, in order to take advantage of the shade from a row of trees edging the lot. Few other cars and no other people were in the lot as he was leaving.

From their position above, Vini and Tulko saw four teen boys accost the man, one of them grabbing his bowling bag and tossing it aside, not only to keep him from swinging it to defend himself, but also to be mean, while another gave the man a shove, knocking him to the ground. The shoving teen then demanded the man's wallet and watch, while his three companions stood laughing, jeering, and cheering their friend on.

Oddly enough, instead of feeling afraid as she might have before her recent experiences, Vini thought, *How silly they look, and how stupid and small, four large boys assaulting an elderly man. They'd be too scared to do anything on their own, so they hide behind each other in a group.*

Sweeping in, and as soon as Vini had slipped from his back very near the scene, Tulko took up position behind her, but about fifteen feet up in the air, so that he could have a clear shot at aiming a nice little windy tussle at the boys, who were more than kept at bay as Vini scooted forward to try to help the old man to his feet.

Though struggling against the sudden sharp wind, one of the boys shouted, "What's this, a little girl?" As his companions laughed, he added, "And what does she think she's going to do with a fake sword?"

Vini had practically forgotten the play sword she was holding in her hand.

When the force of the wind pushing at them suddenly increased, they quickly lost their laughter, particularly because the girl in front of them seemed completely unaffected by the wind; and it occurred to at least a couple of them that she might have some sort of supernatural windy powers.

One of the muggers, less afraid than the others, lunged at Vini, which was a mistake because Tulko, having none of this nonsense, quickly spun the boy around, whereupon, Vini gave him a terrific thwack on the backside with the flat of her sword. “They don’t allow paddling in schools anymore!” she shouted over the wind. “But we’re not in school!” As another of the boys spun somewhat near her, she gave his butt a good sword smack too. This second strike proved enough for the muggers who decided to flee. However, even as they sprinted off across the parking lot toward their car, incredibly quickly with the aid of a hefty tailwind, they found they couldn’t open the door of car, which was being held closed by some unseen windy force. The boys also found they couldn’t run away, because they were being held tightly against the side of the car by some weird wind wall, where they would remain until the police arrived five minutes later.

As the boys were sprinting away from her, noticing a security guard from the skating center running across the parking lot to help, Vini had ducked into the shadows of several nearby trees to quietly watch the scene until it was safe for Tulko to release the boys so that the police could take charge of them.

Sailing off, and enjoying the view of the flashing police car lights below, Vini felt pretty good. Even if this didn’t stop all muggings, she and Tulko had at least been able to help one elderly man.

Early Monday morning, as Vini was getting ready to leave for work, she saw a news report on television of an elderly gentleman being saved from a gang of teen muggers. Slightly interested, Vini watched as the man was interviewed. “I was saved by a girl with red hair, and a unicorn,” he said breathlessly to the newsperson, who was trying very hard not to either laugh or look too skeptical.

“Well, there you have it,” the newsperson said, still trying to keep a straight face, “saved by a red-haired girl and a unicorn.”

Pondering the news report on her walk to work, Vini thought, *Could the man have mistaken a wind horse for a unicorn? But I can’t imagine that he even saw Tulko in the air behind him.*

A little farther down the block, she wondered, *Could he have mistaken the sword for the horn of a unicorn?*

Arriving at the mansion a few minutes later, Vini had just about decided that the man was very shook up and was, therefore, very

confused. She reasoned this out mainly because she didn't have red hair. Instead, her hair was a light brown color that possibly could have been considered to be dark blond, when the summer sun and swimming lightened it up on occasion. But it was definitely not red, and not even in the realm of red like those with strawberry blond or auburn hair.

If he wasn't confused, he probably just had poor eyesight, she decided. However, in thinking about the issue later in the day, she did slightly wonder if some of Tulko's camouflage had perhaps been extended to her in some way. If he had perhaps cast some of his fancy shimmering colors onto her, then her hair might have looked reddish.

In cleaning more of the attic, again with plenty of time to think, Vini marveled at what an incredible blessing Tulko was in her life; and it was almost hard to believe how good God was being to her because she couldn't think of what she might have done to deserve such a wonderful gift. Then she remembered that no one actually deserves what God gives because He gives freely, often whether we deserve it or not. God gives us tools to do good things because He loves us, not because we've earned them. And this was indeed true in Vini's case, as God was truly blessing her with tools and resources to accomplish great things in His name.

Because she knew that people sometimes ended up forgetting exactly Who had made all of their good fortune and blessings possible, as she swept, Vini resolved never to forget what God had given her. She also knew that as easily as God could bestow a blessing, He could take it away. But no matter how long she was able to keep her blessing, she didn't want to waste it. She definitely wanted to put it to good use, for the purposes God intended, which seemed, right now at least, to help people. How handy this would have been if Vini and Tulko had been available to Mrs. Doyle when she was being mugged. They likely could have easily stopped the thugs.

But what else was Vini meant to do? In giving her Tulko as a helper, what did God intend? Could a wind horse possibly help her find a unicorn? If so, how exactly could Tulko help with that? Since he travels fast, and unicorns likely also travel fast, was that the answer? Could a wind horse enable her to catch up to a unicorn?

Vini also wondered what wind horses might eat. Knowing that regular horses like apples, she had tried to give Tulko an apple. But he had simply tossed his head, ignoring the treat.

Having seen the news report about the girl and unicorn saving a man from mugging, at lunchtime, Mrs. Doyle slyly asked Vini, “Did you have a busy night?”

“Oh, not much,” Vini replied, “just pretty much normal.”

Though she couldn’t explain it, Vini didn’t want anyone to know that she was the red-haired girl. Not only that, she didn’t want any of her good deeds to be known. She would much rather be a do-gooder in secret, rather than out in the open, not only because she was sure this was what God intended, but also because she would need to be discreet to have the freedom to be able function well in this role.

Chapter Seven

The New Gardener

Visiting with Tulko very briefly Monday afternoon on the library balcony, Vini somehow knew that she wouldn't be seeing very much of him this week. Not only was he busy himself, off adventuring with some of his windy friends, he somehow knew this was going to be a busy week for Vini as well.

Early Tuesday morning, as she was taking a shower, Vini briefly wondered if wind horses were the answer to her quest all along, and if she was maybe supposed to stop looking for a unicorn. With the awesome power of Tulko on her side, perhaps this was enough help for her to be able to make some sort of really big difference in the world.

After coming back from the bathroom, she literally tripped over her stuffed unicorn, the one that normally sat on her bed next to her Raggedy Ann doll, but that was now lying on the floor in the middle of her bedroom. *I'm positive it was on the bed when I left the room*, Vini thought, as an eerie feeling came over her. She felt it very unlikely that either of her parents had come into her room while she showered; and if one of them had, they certainly would not have put her unicorn on the floor. And it was a family rule that Preston and Vini didn't go into each other's rooms without permission, and especially not when the doors were closed. In returning a book to Vini once, Preston had left it on her bed; but that had been a time when the door was left open. And even if he had come in secretly, he wouldn't have rearranged any of her belongings in such an obvious manner.

The eerie feeling was not like one she might have if something bad were about to happen, or if she happened to meet a person who was up to no good. Those types of sensations, or intuitions, though also spooky, were very easy to identify—like a weight in the pit of her stomach or when some of the hairs on her head happened to stand on end. This eeriness was more like the feeling of a presence of some sort in the room with her, but not a bad presence. Instead, it felt rather

comforting, as though she was being hugged by something invisible and caring; and even though she couldn't actually feel the hug, she just somehow knew it was happening. Smiling, she took both the feeling and tripping over the stuffed animal as God giving her a sign that she was supposed to keep looking for a unicorn.

Dressing for work, she happened to notice a book lying on her bed that she was sure she had already put into her backpack. The book was open to a chapter Vini hadn't yet read that described how unicorns are solitary—seldom seen in company with other creatures, not even others of their kind—and that no reliable witness to a sighting had ever described seeing two or more unicorns at the same time. The book went on to say that while unicorns are believed to be rare, this may not, in fact, be the case. Rather, they are actually numerous, but human beings are so flawed in their search methods that they have great difficulty finding them. Not only that, but because unicorns are believed to be pure creatures, they would not particularly want to be in company with human beings, all of which are flawed, some seriously so.

In not wanting to be late for work, Vini only scanned the next few paragraphs, where she got the idea that the writer of the book had reached some of his conclusions because the only people he interviewed who had ever seen unicorns had stumbled upon them accidentally, not while actually looking for them.

I'll have to read more later, she thought, putting on her shoes. Though the eerie feeling was no longer in the room, Vini felt sure that the book finding its way out of her backpack, and being open to that particular chapter, were further signs that she should continue her quest.

On the walk to the mansion, her ninety-nine percent of being sure turned into one hundred when she noticed a low-hanging cloud containing a shadow within it that looked exactly like a leaping unicorn, as though a unicorn had been running through the sky and had bumped up against the cloud, leaving an imprint. The impression was so detailed that Vini could see not only a spiraled horn, but also large paw-like hooves and a fluffy mane similar to the unicorn resembling a lion on the tapestry in Mrs. Doyle's sewing room.

God was definitely speaking to her in many different ways lately. And since His messages could come from just about anything—even things that might be considered odd as message conduits such as clouds,

donkeys, and tapestries—Vini knew that she would need to continue to pay close attention. Being both a good listener and a good observer often took practice, especially with daydreamers such as herself, and she didn't want to miss anything important that God might be trying to tell her. As she reached the side gate, Vini paused to say a short prayer. *Dear Lord, thank You for the messages of the stuffed unicorn, the book, and the cloud. Please help me continue to pay attention and follow Your lead. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.*

Making her way up the path to the mansion, Vini discovered that the new gardener had started work. In noting several large piles of branches pruned from the oak and elm trees, she wondered if he had possibly started the evening before. If not, he must have been hard at work since the crack of dawn, which was actually the case. And Mrs. Doyle had been keeping eagle eyes on him since dawn, mainly through windows, but also from a perch on her back porch. She was having coffee on the back porch when Vini arrived, not only to keep further eyes on the early gardening efforts, but also because she wanted to introduce Vini to Sam.

“Sam Dellinger,” he said, offering his hand to her, as Vini gave her name as well.

In truth, Mrs. Doyle would find very quickly that she needn't keep such close eyes on Sam, who was extremely skilled with shrubs, trees, ivies, flowers, and just about any other type of greenery that one might imagine Mrs. Doyle to have on her property. Not only that, but Mr. Corrigan had left detailed written instructions, nearly a book's worth, for Sam who had not only studied “the book” before coming to work, he had asked Mr. Corrigan a few questions during their initial tour of the estate on the previous Sunday afternoon. From this, Sam had made a plan (somewhat similar to Vini's initial cleaning plan) for getting things done efficiently. In sticking to the plan, the property would very soon show how organized he was, as well as green thumbed. In truth, Mr. Corrigan was so confident in Sam's abilities, he wasn't even planning to check on him for a couple of weeks, at which time, he would discover the gardening efforts to be progressing well toward getting the estate back to nearly pristine condition.

Fanning herself with a magazine she had carried out with her, Mrs. Doyle told Sam, “Be sure to take plenty of breaks and drink plenty of

fluids. It seems like it's going to be a hot day, even warmer than the weather reports predicted."

Vini could see what she meant, as it did already feel hot, even standing in the shade of a large pecan tree.

"I imagine Mr. Corrigan probably discussed this with you," Mrs. Doyle continued, "but I want to leave the vegetable plot alone for now and concentrate on other things until we get caught up. It's pretty much too late now to plant veggies because it's getting too hot. But we'll probably do some sort of fall garden, unless we get too busy. If so, we'll just focus on getting the plot ready for next spring."

"Mr. C did tell me about the garden," Sam responded. "For now, I'll concentrate on the other things that need done, like the tree pruning, trimming up the climbing fig, ripping out those overgrown pittosporums, and getting hawthorns and boxwoods planted in their place, and then looking after the new bushes, of course. I'll also be adding some Germander to that slope pretty quick here, to help with the erosion. So the most I'll probably do with the vegetable plot in the near future is add a little compost from the pile, to start getting some nutrients worked in so we'll be ready for either a fall or a spring vegetable garden."

"Sounds like a good plan," Mrs. Doyle replied.

Because Vini was curious about the garden shed, having never seen inside it, she followed when Mrs. Doyle went to retrieve a pair of gloves so that she too could do a little gardening, in the form of weeding around the azaleas surrounding the small gazebo in her front yard. She had just gotten her cast off and was anxious to give her arm a little exercise.

In addition to housing all of the normal items like buckets, hoses, shovels, and a wheelbarrow, the shed contained an old household dresser whose drawers were full of things like seeds, gloves, and trowels. A large mirror was attached to the dresser. Though dusty, with plenty of light from the two shed windows, the mirror was still very functional; and as it engaged in echo play with a shiny metal watering can sitting on a shelf directly opposite the dresser, Vini saw two tiny versions of herself and Mrs. Doyle reflected in the surface of the can. For some reason, this reminded her of identical twins, instead of just duplicate images. As Sam ducked into the shed in search of a new

blade for the pole pruner, Vini saw his duplicate reflection in the shiny can as well.

We'd get a lot more done, if each of us had a twin, Vini decided, as she trudged up to the house to begin cleaning.

Inside, while dusting a case of Hummel figurines, Vini noticed that Mrs. Doyle especially collected ones that featured two characters together. Once again, this reminded her of twins, though she couldn't figure out why because, with the exception of twin angels, most of the two-figured Hummels didn't even look like they might be siblings, let alone twins. *I must just have twins on the brain,* she thought.

In being about the same age, Vini and Sam should have had a lot to talk about. However, since Vini was somewhat shy, especially around boys, she found it difficult to talk to him at first. Fortunately, since Sam was a lot like her outgoing little brother, and because they would end up having lunch together most days, this difficulty would not exist for long.

In the evening, while reading, Vini let the book she was holding simply fall open in her hands to a specific page that described how unicorns are thought to be capable of making people see bad things that happen to them in a different light, so that they might recognize the good fortune that often comes out of troubling or trying experiences. Instead of mythology or folklore, this particular book was filled with eyewitness accounts of encounters with magical creatures. For unicorn sightings, each person interviewed stated that the sighting had been followed by some sort of realization, if not revelation, that the person had recently avoided some horrible accident, like a plane crash or some other terrible incident. One individual described his experience as being something like reverse premonition, and stated that the unicorn had conveyed to him that a particular recent misfortune had put him in just the right place, and at just the right time, to save someone else from an accident.

This was all ringing true to Vini, particularly because it was generally believed that unicorns were capable of communicating by mere thought. So why wouldn't they send out thoughts to tell people that whatever happened to them, that might have caused stress or pain, was meant to be, and was a blessing in disguise? One person's account had to do with a sickness that had turned out to be just that, a blessing in disguise. Vini had almost passed on borrowing this book because it was

written somewhat recently and didn't have as much of a fantasy element to it. In preferring mostly older books, containing more colorful tales, she hadn't thought she would get much out of it. She was now glad she had decided to bring it home because it was helping her realize how a unicorn might be a cure for depression. If unicorns truly do communicate by thought, then they can tell a person that their illness or accident or whatever will work out to their benefit, or maybe someone else's, so they won't dwell on their misfortune.

For some reason, Vini suddenly thought of her mother waiting for a very long time at the car repair shop the previous week. Her car had been ready, but they hadn't told her it was ready until nearly two hours later. Mrs. Aberdeen had been very perturbed that they had just let her sit and wait for no reason, but Vini suddenly got the idea that the delay had been meant to be, and that it had prevented her mother from being in a car accident that would have happened if she had left the repair shop earlier. This strong idea was definitely ringing true for Vini, even without a unicorn being around, other than the stuffed one on her bed, and a few other smaller specimens peeking out from among books and other items on various shelves in her room. Vini smiled in also recognizing that picking this particular book and having it fall open in her hands to a specific page were further evidence that God was guiding her, and sending her messages.

A later chapter in the book discussed unicorns in connection with sand dollars, which were a symbol of the birth, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ. Since it was getting close to bedtime, briefly scanning the chapter, Vini made a note in her binder to read it thoroughly later, so that she would be able to understand the theory, which had to do with the sand dollar needing to undergo some sort of change, in this case to be broken to release the five symbolic birds inside, and how people often need to be broken in order to become more Christlike so they can be ready to join Him in their Forever Home. The unicorn, in giving us a different perspective on things, can help human beings understand this process so that even when we experience trials in this life, we can go in the right direction, instead of the wrong one, following Christ instead of Satan. Even without reading more thoroughly, Vini thought she got the gist of the theory. We have to be

changed in some way, even sometimes broken, to be truly improved, and to ascend to something greater.

There was a lot more to the chapter, of course, which she was looking forward to reading later, in particular, something about the five birds inside the sand dollar (representing our five earthly senses) leaving us and flying away, to make room for something even better, some sort of other sense, or senses. The unicorn, it seemed, could help to free us from the traditional senses that bind us, not only by causing us to think of certain troubling things in a better light, but also by giving us an inkling of what the evolved person might be like, while guiding us toward that hopeful but mysterious something that human beings are always striving for but seldom finding, complete fulfillment, this being in perfect parallel to seeking unicorns, since people are always looking for the creatures but seldom finding them. The chapter also stressed that we might be looking in the wrong places or in the wrong ways. But for sure, if we come across sand dollars, we should pay attention to them because they had evidently led to, or at least been nearby, unicorns sighted in the past. A short poem at the end of the chapter was about following a trail of sand dollars to a treasure in heaven.

This all made sense to Vini, since she knew that human beings couldn't improve without changing in some way, and this tied in perfectly with her recent wonderings about where the improvements to human beings were. *We're evidently stuck*, she thought, *mainly because we're too worldly. I think we need unicorns, creatures that are otherworldly, to get us unstuck.*

At work the next morning, Vini noticed a jar of sand dollars in one of Mrs. Doyle's bathrooms that she hadn't noticed before. Smiling, she again took this as a sign that she was on the right track. Determined not to miss something important, such as another message, or possibly an actual unicorn in the bathroom, she peered hopefully around her, carefully studying her surroundings. Though she didn't discover anything significant, this didn't dim her hope as she cheerfully went on with her day.

In the afternoon, as she was putting some cucumber and onion peels onto the compost heap, she took the opportunity of asking Sam, who was nearby, "Should I get the pitchfork from the shed and turn the heap each time I add something?"

Shaking his head, he responded, “No, not that often, just occasionally. And if raccoons or other critters are getting into it, like over here, you don’t need to turn it at all because they keep it pretty well stirred up.”

“Oh, I see,” Vini responded, as he showed her a couple of spots in the pile where some type of critter had been digging, likely looking for either bugs or treats like strawberry tops and cantaloupe rinds.

Walking back up to the house, Vini suddenly sensed Tulko somewhere nearby. Though he didn’t show himself, because Sam was present, Vini felt happy and comforted in just knowing that her protector was checking up on her.

On Thursday, Mrs. Doyle drew Vini’s attention to a coldness she had been feeling in the parlor.

“It’s such a warm day,” Mrs. Doyle said, “and the sun has been on the windows, so it shouldn’t feel cold.”

“Maybe it’s a breeze coming from the chimney,” Vini suggested, “if the flue is open.”

“I felt a draft last winter,” Mrs. Doyle responded, “but I checked and it was closed.”

Reaching up into the chimney, Vini also found the flue to be closed. In trying to open it, so that it could possibly be readjusted and tightened, she discovered it to be jammed.

“Don’t bother with it,” Mrs. Doyle recommended. “I’ll just get the sweep to look at it next time he’s out. But that might be a couple of years off because I don’t use the fireplaces much, with as warm as our winters are. I usually only have a chimneysweep look at them every five years or so.”

Gazing out the window at Sam hard at work ripping out a pittosporum bush that had grown to nearly the size of an elephant, Mrs. Doyle said, “You know, I haven’t yet mentioned that far corner of the garden to him, the one where nothing much grows; but have you noticed he’s avoiding it without being told? So it’s not just my imagination. There’s definitely something wrong there.”

As they were leaving the room, Mrs. Doyle added, “Even though I’m not Catholic, right after I had the house repainted in the spring, I had it blessed by a priest, on the recommendation of an old school chum who was visiting me from out of state. She told me she thought

something was wrong, even though she couldn't tell me what. Anyway, she's Catholic and that's what she thought might help. But some people say it only works in new houses, or when the house is new to its current occupants."

Whether the priest's blessing worked or not, Vini said a prayer later while reading a bible in the library, that God Himself would bless the house and keep it and its occupants safe.

The parlor may have been cool, but the garden was very hot, as Vini discovered when leaving for the day. Waving goodbye to Sam who was watering bushes, she fairly wilted just taking the walk from the house to the side gate. She had been hoping it would stay cool at least until after her time at camp, which was coming up the next week. With horse riding as the main activity that she was looking forward to, she would be wearing jeans much of the time, instead of shorts, which were generally more preferable in the summer heat. *Oh well*, Vini thought, *we can't have everything our own way*. However, to her surprise, the walk down Paloma Drive actually felt very comfortable; and even though there wasn't much breeze, she felt fairly cool. The weather was certainly changeable lately, which didn't particularly surprise Vini, being used to this in her area of the country. *Maybe camp won't be so hot after all*, she thought hopefully.

Early Friday morning, in taking a stroll around the estate, both Vini and Mrs. Doyle were astounded that the gardens seemed to be getting in such excellent shape in just three days of Sam's hard work. Of course, he had been working each day pretty much from dawn to dusk, which Mrs. Doyle had been fretting about, fearful that he might suddenly drop from exhaustion, or wear himself out to nearly a feather. However, Sam assured her that he was fine with the long hours and that he simply wanted to make a good bit of progress in the first couple weeks of work.

Though he hadn't quite started, because he hadn't wanted to disturb the neighbors too early, he was planning to spend the morning mulching the many piles of branches he had gleaned from pruning. A friend of Mr. Corrigan's had dropped off the chipper-shredder, a piece of equipment shared by several area estates, the previous evening. Dressed in long sleeves and long pants, Sam also donned eye guards and ear plugs for protection before beginning.

Heading inside together, Vini reminded Mrs. Doyle that she would be gone the next week for camp.

“I already have it on the calendar,” Mrs. Doyle remarked, gesturing to the wall by the refrigerator as they passed.

“Is there anything pressing that needs to be done before I leave today?” Vini asked.

Shaking her head, Mrs. Doyle said, “No, in fact, if you want to leave early to go home and pack, I’m fine with that.”

“I’m already packed,” Vini told her. “And I want to finish the attic today, if I can, so I can scratch that off the list.”

By the end of the morning, Vini had nearly finished in the attic, excepting the chore of carrying several boxes downstairs that Mrs. Doyle had filled with various items and set aside for donation to a local thrift store.

They had lunch on the back porch with Sam who, covered with little mulch bits, didn’t want to enter the house.

Since he didn’t yet have a driver’s license, or a car either for that matter, and since he lived several miles from Mrs. Doyle’s house, Sam was riding his bicycle to work each day. “When I was riding in on Paloma this morning,” he said, “I noticed your neighbor making a gorilla topiary, and I stopped to talk to him for a few minutes.”

“Do you mean Mr. Galloway?” Vini asked, very surprised, as she had never seen him make anything other than balls and spirals out of his bushes.

“Yes,” Sam replied. “If I have extra time, he offered to give me a lesson or two in topiaries. He says he has plenty of privets, laurels, and spruces that I can practice on.”

“You see that line of yew trees over there?” Mrs. Doyle said, pointing. “When you get to learning, I’d love a row of giant mushrooms made out of them.”

Smiling, and with a nod, Sam told her, “Sounds like a plan.”

After lunch, while carrying boxes downstairs, Vini had it in her mind that she wanted to clean the refrigerator before leaving. Although it wasn’t on the current to-do list, she had noticed that it was looking a little grungy, and like it could use a little attention.

While picking up a box in the attic, in a slight hurry and with her mind on the refrigerator, Vini accidentally bumped into one of Louetta’s

paintings. Though she barely noticed the small movement on the crowded storage shelf next to the stack of boxes earmarked for the thrift store, Vini definitely noticed when Pizzo spit at her, particularly because he was a good aim and the spittle landed exactly on her left cheek. As the tiny man-like creature on the shelf came into focus, and after her brain took a moment to process the surprise encounter, Vini's mind flew back to the teatime conversation with Mrs. Doyle the previous week.

"But I thought trolls were bigger," she said aloud.

With this, Pizzo straightened himself up to stand taller, clearly indicating that he understood her words. However, his height difference of approximately one-half inch was not his only response, as he then proceeded to throw a large pencil eraser at her from a box containing office supplies that was sitting next to him on the shelf. Fortunately, he usually couldn't lift heavy things, which is probably why Mrs. Doyle had said he wasn't much dangerous. Swinging himself down from the shelf, he left in a huff, scurrying off to one of his secret tunnels, but not before giving her one last glare of warning, which he felt sure she would correctly interpret as being more careful about the paintings in the future.

Pausing for a break between carrying down boxes, and gazing out of one of the dormers of the attic, Vini could see a mirror on a dresser behind her reflected in the glass of the window. Seeing herself in double, she was once more reminded of twins, particularly because, from her current high-up spot, she could clearly see the tops of Mr. Galloway's towering twin elms standing either side of his front walk. Reminding herself to look for the gorilla topiary on her way home, she went back to carrying boxes downstairs.

As she was leaving for the day, Vini stopped in the garden to tell Sam that she would be at camp the following week.

"I can help Mrs. Doyle inside while you're gone," he said, "if she needs anything done."

"Well, I'll see you when I get back," Vini said, trudging off to the side gate.

"Have fun!" he called, as he again turned on the chipper-shredder.

Vini did remember to take a peek at Mr. Galloway's gorilla on her way home, which was nearly complete, with only one arm remaining to be sculpted from the enormous laurel.

I shouldn't be surprised, Vini thought, since she had always observed Mr. Galloway to be both skilled and creative in his gardening. She just hadn't thought him to be this playful, until now.

However, Vini was about to discover that even the most unlikely people have the power to surprise us.

Chapter Eight

Camp Burberry Wiffle

Camp Burberry Wiffle was named after the two women who founded it, May Burberry and Alexandra Wiffle. The nearly five-hundred acre property had originally been a sheep and cattle ranch owned by May's father, and which she inherited when he passed away. Though she hadn't continued with the sheep and cattle, she did keep the property. May and Alexandra had been college roommates. When Alexandra inherited eighteen horses from her uncle, the two decided to team up to run a hippotherapy program to help local children with disabilities. Later, they added the summer camp, making over old farm-hand bunk houses into cabins. Though they only held camp in the summer, the property regularly hosted area church and business retreats, mainly on weekends because the hippotherapy program was held on weekdays, generally Tuesdays and Fridays.

The camp was only about twenty miles from Vini's home. However, the proximity and the horse activities were not the only reasons her parents had decided on this particular camp. The main reason was that it offered some Christian activities, such as weekday-morning devotionals and a church service on Sundays held in a small chapel on the ranch. Also, most of the families receiving the hippotherapy services were not asked to pay. Since the program relied mainly on donations and volunteer help, Vini's parents felt it was important to support these types of endeavors and were not only paying the fees but were also giving a little extra money to the camp. They also knew of several children from their church who had benefitted from the hippotherapy services over the years.

Because of the expense, this was only Vini's second time of going to a camp, the other time being a soccer-themed camp when she was nine. Her grandfather, who lived out of state, was paying for half, which was the main reason her parents were able to make a separate donation. Vini herself had decided that she would make a donation to

the drop box at the camp from some of the money she had earned from working.

She had already started writing a thank-you letter to her grandfather, but wanted to wait until after camp to finish it, not only to be able to tell him about some of the activities, but also because she wanted to send him a few pictures. With the whole idea of going to camp being fresh air and exercise, and less technology, no cameras, phones, or other such devices were allowed. But Alexandra was an avid photographer, as were a couple of the volunteer college students there to help run things for the summer. With the staff taking plenty of pictures, the package for each camp-goer included a digital album of camp photos to take home, from which they could do whatever they liked—make their own albums, frame up, whatever. Vini planned to print some of the pictures to send to her grandfather. Each camper also received two t-shirts and a sun visor during their stay at Camp Burberry Wiffle.

Preston was not going to camp this year, having instead opted for his grandfather's offer of a summer pass to a local waterpark to keep him occupied, and active.

Each session of camp was scheduled to run from one Saturday morning to the next, and as Vini's parents dropped her off, she saw many of the previous group of camp-goers being picked up.

Camp Burberry Wiffle was currently an all-girls camp, the owners having opted for the simplicity of this, instead of the complication of additional rules and watchfulness needed at a camp mixing boys and girls. The hippotherapy program attendees on Tuesdays and Fridays were the only exceptions to this as they included both boys and girls, of all shapes and sizes, from toddlers to teens, with various kinds of disabilities. The girls attending summer camp were ages ranging from eleven to sixteen, and many were anxious to help with the program, as well as learn more about how hippotherapy benefitted children with disabilities. Vini was very excited about this and had already signed up, during the registration process for camp, as a helper for both days.

Lugging her duffel bag across the lawn to the main pavilion for the Greeting Meeting, with thirty-one other girls doing the same, Vini briefly sensed Tulko somewhere above her. She hadn't been sure he would make a visit to her at camp, but she was happy that he had because it was comforting to feel his presence.

The Greeting Meeting was brief, mainly to tell the campers which cabins they had been assigned, and to go over a few rules, one of the main ones being the importance of water conservation, not only because the ranch ran on well and rain-water collection systems, but also because water conservation was extremely important to the future of everyone.

Vini was dismayed to see among the group of campers an extremely disagreeable former classmate of hers, Charlene Orr, who liked to be called Charlie. Even more dismaying was the discovery that Vini would be sharing a cabin with Charlie. They were in one of the smaller bunkhouses, holding four girls in total, the other two being a set of identical twins, Tamara and Samantha Richmond, or Tami and Sami for short. From having had twins so often on the brain lately, Vini briefly wondered if those thoughts had been something of a premonition of meeting Tami and Sami. The twins were the same age as Vini and Charlie.

In greeting Vini and in introducing herself to the twins, Charlie said that she had tried to get in with a group of four friends from school, but that they were in one of the smaller cabins too, so there hadn't been room for her.

They were probably happy not to have to room with you, Vini thought, if they really know anything about you. Though she knew she shouldn't be having ugly thoughts about Charlie, it was difficult not to because Charlie had been the girl who beat Vini up in third grade.

As a show of power, and as a way of showing off, Charlie and her cousin, Dana Post, had randomly picked out two quiet girls to bully (because the quiet ones seemed safer, less likely to fight back), and had threatened to beat them up, which they did, after about two weeks of bullying and threatening, because the bullies basically felt that they had to go through with the threats to prove that they were more than just talk to those they were showing off for, to put their money where their mouth was, so to speak. Vini generally walked with Margaret Hiller halfway home each day before separating to take different streets for the rest of the way. Following the girls after school one day, with a crowd of onlookers in tow, Dana targeted Margaret, while Charlie focused on Vini, hitting her several times with her fist on the back as she tried to walk away, pulling her back by her sweater and hitting her again as she

again tried to get away, then shoving her hard enough to make her fall to her knees, after which, both Charlie and Dana decided they had made their point and walked away with several of their friends patting them on the backs.

Though she had come across a lot of mean kids in grade school, Vini had never experienced physical bullying before. And she was, of course, terribly upset. But not much could be done, probably because she didn't have visible bruises or broken bones. Vini's sweater was torn at the shoulder seam, but except for that, she bore no physical signs of the encounter, other than a slight skinned knee. Both Vini's and Margaret's parents had called the police. But it seemed to Vini that the police didn't do much, and that nothing much really happened, though Charlie's father had forced her to apologize to Vini. Since no actual physical injuries occurred, the adults seemed to think an apology was enough. But for the next couple of years, Vini was terrified of Charlie and her cousin, always afraid that it might happen again, particularly because Charlie was always bigger than she, and always acted rougher, not to mention crass and sarcastic. Thankfully, nothing else physical ever happened, probably mainly because both Dana and Charlie seemed to find it enough to just ignore Margaret and Vini, as though they were invisible. Charlie and Dana both moved in fifth grade, and Vini did not go to the same middle school as they did. Margaret also moved, a year later, removing a little more of the reminder of the incident. Though the emotional scars remained, because Vini still felt hurt by what had happened, and was still sometimes afraid of bullies, she had gotten better about standing up to them over the past couple of years.

Now, this close in proximity to Charlie, she would have thought some of the old feelings of fear might have resurfaced. However, this was not the case. Instead, Vini felt no fear at all; and she chalked this up to getting older and wiser, along with having found some extra confidence recently, particularly because she now felt much closer to God than she had before. He was always with her; there was no mistaking it. She could definitely feel Him with her, and even inside her, all of the time. Knowing that God was always around and looking out for her made her stronger, more alive, and less fearful. *He will never leave me, nor forsake me*, Vini reminded herself, *because He promises this in the bible. And He always keeps His promises because*

He is always faithful and true to His Word. So, though annoyed at having to bunk with Charlie, she didn't anticipate any real problems with her at camp. *Plus, Vini thought, if she does anything, I'll just do what I can to protect myself, and get help from the counselors.* In addition to the people running the hippotherapy program, Camp Burberry Wiffle had eight or ten college kids around at any given time, either volunteering or doing internships, who were easily accessible. And Vini felt sure they were more than capable of dealing with someone like Charlie. Several other staff were also readily available, such as the cook and his assistant, as well as a carpenter and two horse caretakers. In thinking of all of these things, Vini was able to quickly shake off the doom-and-gloom feelings she had experienced upon first spotting Charlie.

After getting settled in, and after lunch, the first scheduled activity was a choice of either swimming or horseback riding. This was an easy choice for Vini. Though she loved swimming, she had been most looking forward to riding. The camp currently had twenty-seven horses, sixteen of which would be taking this group out. Before embarking on the ride, one of the counselors checked to make sure everyone was wearing long pants, to protect the legs, and the right kind of shoes, ones with a sturdy heel that could hold the foot in place in the stirrup without slipping, which was extremely important to prevent injuries. If anyone hadn't brought sturdy shoes, either because they had forgotten or because they couldn't afford to buy them, the camp had various pairs of donated boots for loan. Fortunately, this particular group was all properly attired, and there was no delay in setting out on a nice long tour of the ranch.

Charlie was among this group; and while she seemed somewhat loud and a little bossy, Vini found she wasn't too much bothered by her. In fact, determined as she was not to let Charlie spoil her fun, Vini mainly just ignored her, while also hoping that Charlie might have changed and improved since Vini last saw her. It was possible for people to change, and Vini knew it was important to be open-minded, and give people the benefit of the doubt, at least until proved otherwise.

Vini was somewhat surprised that riding the regular horse, a Palomino filly named Peach Blossom, but called Miss Peachy, was just as much fun as riding Tulko. She couldn't sense the wind horse nearby

at the moment. She didn't think it likely he would visit her at camp again, since he knew she would be busy. *When he came by earlier*, she thought, *he was probably just checking to make sure I got here okay.*

Later, after an evening of singing, charades, and roasting marshmallows around a campfire, Vini slept very soundly.

Since the Sunday Services at the camp chapel were optional, Vini was surprised and pleased to find over half of the girls attending, including Charlie.

With no activities scheduled until the afternoon, having brought three books with her, Vini read for a while before lunch. She had been worried about bringing borrowed books to camp, in case something should happen to them, but Mrs. Doyle had encouraged her to take them.

Given the choice of hiking or riding in the afternoon, Vini again chose riding, as this was not something she was ever sure she could get tired of.

At nighttime, the racket of a thunderstorm just before midnight served to severely unsettle Tami, Sami, and Vini; and they slept poorly until the storm passed around three a.m. Charlie, it seemed, was not unsettled, and slept soundly the entire night.

On Monday morning, Vini again chose riding over other options such as hiking and swimming.

After the ride, one of the counselors held a jumping lesson for several of the girls that were interested, and Vini was pleased to discover that Miss Peachy was a horse that could jump. After helping to groom the jumper horses, the girls fed apples to them as treats.

Swimming after lunch, Vini found herself keeping an eye on Marlene Simons who was struggling somewhat, being basically terrified of the water and not having yet learned to swim in her twelve years of living. However, at her parents' urging, and on her own determination, she was making a big effort this summer in trying to learn to swim. With the lifeguard, the swim instructor, and two monitors busy at the other end of the pool, a little clique of girls (that had evidently been dominating the pool the past couple of days) started splashing Marlene, and dunking her by pushing down on her shoulders and on her head. Without even thinking, Vini raced over to stop them, rather forcefully shoving them off, after which, she supported Marlene in the water until

she stopped panicking and could manage on her own. Though Charlie hadn't dunked Marlene, she was one of the girls who had been splashing water in her face to scare her. But she had quickly retreated to the opposite end of the pool as Vini swooped in. Having managed to rid the area of the tormentors, Vini gave Marlene a few pointers on both treading water and floating on her back.

Shortly after the incident, one of the bullies loudly smarted off about how Vini was just trying to be the Counselors' Pet, to get some brownie points. As a couple other members of the swim-clique agreed with their friend, Vini responded with, "Well, you can say whatever you want, and you can call me names. But the plain fact is that what you did was wrong. And I'd do what I did all over again, if I needed to."

Vini was very surprised to hear Tami, right behind her, say, "Right, me too. I'd stop you too."

As Sami chimed in with, "So don't be so mean the next time you're in a pool with someone learning to swim," the girls of the clique fell silent.

In thinking about what happened afterwards, Vini realized that, in sticking up for Marlene, she had managed to do what she wished she had done with Boyd, which was stick up for him. Though she had stepped up this time, she still felt very guilty about not doing so at school. If she had, others might have also stepped forward (like Tami and Sami had here) to help Boyd.

The swim instructor and monitors had been organizing races, and Vini decided to have a go at the hundred-meter one, which turned out to be the most popular race.

With so many girls wanting to be involved, they ended up having three hundred-meter races, the winner to be determined by time. Charlie ended up being put in charge of the stopwatch for this, at which point, Vini found her hope that her old adversary might have improved completely dispelled because Charlie ended up cheating on the time so that one of her friends from school could win. This was one of the four girls Charlie had wanted to bunk with and who had so far shunned her at camp. Vini recognized this maneuver as Charlie trying to get in the good graces of that little group of friends, to get their attention and get them to like her. In the excitement and confusion of the races, the instructor and monitors hadn't noticed the cheat. But, in addition to

Vini, several other racers knew. However, even though it wasn't fair, they decided not to press the issue, mainly because they all knew that cheaters always ended up biting themselves in the butt in the end. Plus, the prizes for first, second, and third were not all that spectacular—a t-shirt, a camp towel, and a reusable water bottle, respectively. The four girls ended up treating Charlie the same as they had before, so it seemed she hadn't really gained much from the cheating, other than possibly some frustration.

The campers enjoyed a movie after dinner on Monday, after which, they retired to their bunkhouses.

Still slightly perturbed, but deciding it wasn't worth the energy to be angry, Vini basically ignored Charlie. Vini wasn't ugly to her; in fact, she was rather polite. She just simply didn't pay Charlie any attention. Tami and Sami, aware of the stopwatch cheating, also chose not to engage much with Charlie. Before bedtime, the girls ended up talking some about high school. The twins lived inner city, and would be going to a different school than Vini. They too were somewhat worried about the transition from middle to high school. Charlie would be going to the same high school as Vini, but they didn't talk much about this, mainly because Vini and the twins chose to do some reading before bed, not only because they didn't particularly want to converse with Charlie, but because Tami and Sami, like Vini, really enjoyed reading.

Tuesday dawned very exciting for Vini, who would be helping with the hippotherapy program pretty much the whole day. She had just recently thought that she might want to work with kids, and specifically ones with disabilities, in the future.

Many of the children couldn't walk, and the program had a special apparatus to help get them on and off of the horses, as well as safety equipment to hold them on. Vini started by helping to guide a horse, though Lady Velvet didn't truly need much guiding, as often as she had done this in her life. Indeed, the mare basically humored Vini by going along with the guiding. Since Vini could sense Lady Velvet's care and competence while carrying Megan, a five-year-old, she ended up walking beside the horse, instead of leading, so that she could keep one hand on the little girl's leg to help keep her steady. When helping

Megan down, in seeing the delight in her eyes and hearing the giddiness in her squeaky little voice, Vini felt good all over.

Later, when again walking beside as Lady Velvet carried a teenage boy, Vini suddenly felt the presence of a wind horse nearby that was definitely not Tulko. And she didn't think it was Dara either. As casually as possible, Vini glanced around her, then above, where she found herself looking into the face of a wind horse only a few feet above her that she had never seen before. Glancing down quickly, so as not to draw attention to him, she felt a little thought being laid onto her forehead, which was the horse telling her that his name was Valo.

He stayed above the stables and corrals for quite some time, and it became obvious to Vini that he was helping to seat some of the kids onto the horses, as well as hold them safely on during their rides.

Though the day was not windy, the area around the stables was somewhat breezy and warm, but in a comfortable way, from the power exuding from the wind horse, who Vini thought might actually be more powerful than Tulko, just by the feel of his presence. Plus, he looked like an older horse, being slightly larger and more mature looking than Tulko.

Of course, Vini couldn't know, especially because even May Burberry didn't know, that a wind horse had attached himself to both the camp and to May. Not everyone under the protection of a wind horse would actually get to see or ride the horse. Nor would these powerful creatures always communicate with their charges. In fact, May would never come to either see or communicate in any way with Valo during her lifetime, though he would be around her, as helper and protector, all the days of her life. In this situation, Valo basically felt his assignment was to help May with the regular horses and with her program. Although most of the older horses used in the program didn't need much help, the younger ones, in training, definitely benefitted from the help of the wind horse guiding them, as well as helping to keep the children safe atop them. As she caught herself a couple of times looking directly at Valo, Vini looked quickly away, not wanting to draw attention to him. In truth, Vini was only able to see him because she was developing the ability to recognize wind horses. Others, if looking exactly at the right spot, at the right moment, would likely only see a

soft swirl of glistening sapphire, crimson, gold, and amethyst—like multi-colored cloud wisps gently twining themselves together.

On Wednesday morning, the entire camping group rode a bus to a neighboring ranch that bordered a river to go fishing. Vini had never been fishing before and found it incredibly fun. Preston had been a few times with their father, but never she; and Vini thought she might like to tag along the next time they went.

After coming back, instead of going riding in the afternoon, Vini accompanied Tami and Sami to the Craft Shack, where a local jewelry artist was giving lessons on how to make jewelry. After making a necklace for her mother, on a whim, Vini made a bracelet for Charlie. For some reason while fishing, she had remembered a lesson from a recent youth group meeting called, “Loving Your Unlovable Neighbor.” Of course, Vini already knew that the Christian interpretation of “love your neighbor” meant that we were supposed to love our enemies as well as all others. But what she learned from the meeting’s lesson was that if we act like we love our enemies, no matter how unlikeable, we will eventually come to like them better. The kinder thoughts just naturally follow the kinder behavior, which then enables us to love them as we should. Charlie, very surprised by the gift, actually impulsively hugged Vini, which seemed to take both girls by surprise, particularly because it didn’t seem all that awkward or unusual.

In the evening, just before sunset, having not gone hiking much since arriving, Vini decided to take a stroll on one of the shorter nature trails with Tami and Sami. Tagging along, but lagging a bit behind the twins because she found herself wanting to be alone with her thoughts, Vini noticed Tulko and Valo frolicking in a patch of low-hanging clouds in the distance. Zipping and chasing around so fast, the aura surrounding them and the trails they were leaving looked almost as though an artist had splashed several dollops of softly-glowing paint onto a palette in the sky and was now swirling them up with a large brush. But because of the light of the sunset, the display actually became much more intense than that, like the fiery colors of an enormous opal decorating the horizon, coming to life, and reaching out with long tendrils to dance in the breeze.

Several other onlookers witnessing the play of Tulko and Valo only imagined that they were seeing a distant moving rainbow of unusual

colors that was part of the most spectacular sunset they would ever see, or that anyone might see, possibly in all of time.

Back at the cabin, mainly because of the subject matter of Vini's books, the girls found themselves talking about magical creatures such as gryphons and phoenixes. An hour before curfew and bed check, when the twins left for a while to visit with friends in the cabin next door, Charlie and Vini continued the discussion. Vini was incredibly surprised that Charlie seemed to know something about both gryphons and thunderbirds. And part of what she told Vini about thunderbirds sounded in a small way similar to some of what Vini had found out about unicorns, in particular, that the creatures might be quite different than what people would expect.

"Thunderbirds are actually more earthbound than air bound, like most people usually think," Charlie said, "which is why people have a hard time finding them. People looking for them tend to look in the wrong places, sometimes not even noticing a thunderbird when it could be sitting right in front of them, on a hilltop or perched in a big tree."

Running over some of the details of her research in her mind, Vini agreed. "Like we might not see a unicorn if it was standing right in front of us either," she said.

"Our expectations bind us, and our senses," Charlie went on. "When we only expect to hear, see, or smell certain things, we tend to miss other things. So we might not see or hear a thunderbird. We might dismiss what we are seeing and hearing as something else, something natural or something we are used to, like a storm. Or our eyes might be tricked into thinking we are seeing a tree." After a short pause, she added, "Some people think finding or meeting a magical creature would be great, but I think it would probably be pretty scary. People think how helpful it would be to know a dragon, or a giant, when it might not be all that helpful. It might just be scary instead, since they are probably wild and unpredictable."

In thinking how Tulko acted with her, so kind and gentle, always helpful and never scary, Vini said, "Well, if they aren't helpful, it might just be that they don't want to help people who are not so nice."

Since Vini had said this in somewhat of an accusatory tone, definitely directed at her, Charlie immediately became defensive. "How am I not so nice?" she questioned in both a hurt and demanding tone.

Vini hardly knew where to begin. After a brief pause, as her muddled thoughts organized themselves, she sputtered out, “Aside from the sarcasm, picking on people, cheating—yes, we know you cheated with the stopwatch—did you forget that you terrorized me in third grade, threatened me, followed me walking home, and you and your cousin beat me up!? Well, you were the one who hit me. Your cousin hit Margaret. But you basically beat me up. That’s what it’s called when you hit someone multiple times for no reason!”

Charlie, after a moment of surprise, sat thinking for a few more moments before she quietly stated, “I’d hoped you might have forgotten about that.”

“Of course I didn’t forget!” Vini hotly retorted. “Did you?”

After another silent moment, Charlie said, again quietly, “Sorry about that,” before quickly slipping out of the cabin.

Surprised at the sudden departure, Vini hardly knew what to think. *Was that an apology? Was it sincere? And was it an apology for beating me up? Or was she sorry that she forgot about it until now? And was she even sorry that she cheated at the swim races?*

Now somewhat angry, Vini was glad Charlie had left, because she didn’t particularly want to argue with her, let alone discuss anything more at this time. Taking deep breaths to try to calm down, she shook her head almost in disbelief over what had just happened. And in thinking everything over, Vini was dismayed to find her powers of discernment not currently functioning well because she still couldn’t figure out exactly what Charlie meant by the quick apology.

Charlie didn’t come back until after Tami and Sami did, which greatly relieved Vini, who had been dreading the awkwardness of being alone with Charlie so soon after their somewhat heated discussion.

With time to sleep on their conversation, the whole thing seemed much more distant in the morning, which made things much less awkward between the girls.

Feeling she had done enough riding for a bit, Vini swam Thursday morning and chose a nature hike with Tami and Sami for the afternoon. In making an effort to be sociable, and in wanting to get along with her bunkmates, Charlie decided to tag along on the hike.

As the path wound its way through a long stretch of meadow, the girls became somewhat spread out, with Tami and Sami ahead,

followed by Charlie about the length of a football field back, and Vini bringing up the rear about a hundred or so feet behind her.

Charlie and Vini were both taken completely by surprise when two large wild boars darted out from the trees fringing the meadow and charged at Charlie, who froze in fear as she saw them rushing towards her. Vini too stayed rooted in place, unsure of what she should do and also fearful, as it was well known that boars could be very dangerous, especially their tusks.

Thankfully, the girls wouldn't have to stay in fear long because Tulko and Valo swooped in just before the boars reached Charlie's position.

Though Vini had seen the horses briefly, in shielding herself from the intensity of their power, she could now only sense them, as they effectively placed a wind barrier between the boars and Charlie, who ducked down and covered her head to protect herself from the sudden frenzy that had sprung up. In later recalling the event, Charlie would only think that a freak windstorm, oddly contained to just the center of the meadow, had popped up to save her from the attack.

In recent years, wild boars had become a huge problem in the area because they were very prolific and caused a lot of property damage, as well as occasionally injuring people, livestock, and pets. Fortunately, these two wouldn't be bothering anyone again anytime soon because Valo and Tulko had carried them off on sturdy wind platforms and were in the process of depositing them about eight hundred miles away in a vast wilderness area.

As the windy melee subsided, Vini rushed forward to check on Charlie, who was still ducking down. She was unharmed, and both girls were relieved that the boars were nowhere in sight.

Helping Charlie to her feet, Vini suddenly sensed a strange presence, very nearby, a presence she felt sure was something other than a wind horse, but that was possibly just as powerful. However, in glancing around, she couldn't see anything. And she wouldn't have time to wonder about it until later because Tami and Sami had arrived on the scene, having rushed back to their companions upon hearing the ruckus and seeing a lot of swirling grasses and small branches behind them caught up in some kind of sudden whirlwind that they thought was

something like a mini tornado. It was certainly bigger and more powerful than any dust devils they had ever seen.

When Vini had time to go over everything in her mind later in the evening, she decided that Valo was probably the unusual presence she had felt. Since she wasn't as familiar with him as she was Tulko, his presence had probably just seemed strange to her. However, upon sensing him nearby on Friday morning while working with the hippotherapy horses, she quickly talked herself out of this notion. What she had felt in the meadow was certainly not Valo, or any other wind horse, but something quite different. Nor was it God because she was very familiar with His unseen Presence. What she had felt, though powerful, wasn't like the power of God. Plus, although the mysterious presence hadn't felt evil, whatever it was didn't feel like the comfort, protection, and guidance she felt when God was with her.

At the end of the day, May called Vini aside to compliment her on her skills and suggest that Vini might think about coming back the next summer as one of the paid staff, to help with the hippotherapy program several weeks in a row. "If we had more help," May told her, "we could do it more than two days a week. And I think that's important in the summer, because more people want to come in the summer. We've actually had to turn a few people away in the last few weeks." Giving Vini her business card, she added, "Think about it and let me know."

Vini didn't have to think much about it. What a good opportunity this would be, especially related to her future, not only in being able to learn more, but also in getting some work experience under her belt. She had recently found herself pondering doing this very thing as a career, especially because she seemed to have such a knack with horses. She also seemed to be relating to the kids really well. Smiling both inside and out as she carefully pocketed the card, she resolved to make firm plans to take May up on the offer. She felt sure her parents would approve, and she didn't think Mrs. Doyle would mind either. If Vini was still working part time at the mansion next summer, they could probably work something out for her to be gone for a few weeks. Mrs. Doyle was very clever in that way; after all, she had managed to work out having Violet gone for several months.

In returning to the bunkhouse to change clothes before dinner, Vini suddenly remembered something she had read recently, and she hurried

to consult her notes. “Unicorns help us see paths God has placed in front of us, and ways in which He is blessing us, helping us recognize the paths and blessings so we can make the most of the opportunities.”

Again smiling all over, Vini wondered if there might be a unicorn somewhere nearby. With regular horses and wind horses in the area, it wasn't too much of a stretch to imagine a unicorn frolicking in one of the secluded meadows on the ranch.

On this last evening at Camp Burberry Wiffle, Vini thoroughly enjoyed a show featuring short skits and dance segments put on by eight of her fellow campers who had gone to dance classes offered at the camp. Afterwards, the group enjoyed singing and roasting marshmallows before curfew and bed check.

Saying goodbye to friends on Saturday morning, Vini gave Charlie a hug. Though there was still a little awkwardness between them, Vini wanted to part on a good note, especially because Charlie had been very friendly towards her, particularly after the boar incident.

At home in the afternoon, bubbling with excitement not only about the fun she had had at camp, but also about the prospect of going again the next summer, Vini helped her mother wash her camp clothes. In the evening, after finishing the letter to her grandfather, she looked at the camp photos and printed a few of them to send along with the letter.

After a good night's sleep, attending Sunday-morning church and bible study further helped her settle back into her normal routine, and she found herself looking forward to going to work the next day.

Discreetly visiting with Tulko behind several large bushes in the back yard just before dinner, Vini was surprised to hear her mother calling her to the phone. Seldom receiving phone calls, this was unexpected; but Vini never would have expected the caller to be Charlie, or to have Charlie invite her to dinner and a sleepover at her house on Tuesday evening.

In just a brief conversation, the girls made the plan that Vini's parents would drop her off on Tuesday, and Charlie's dad would drop her off at work on Wednesday morning. And Charlie assured her that she knew they couldn't stay up too late on Tuesday night because of Vini's work the next day.

Chapter Nine

Expect the Unexpected

So surprised by the call and the invitation, Vini couldn't think of a good excuse to refuse, at least not quickly enough to say no on the phone. Not that she would have refused out of meanness, but more out of caution, in wanting to keep Charlie at something of an arm's length as far as distance in her personal life.

Vini was still stunned for a short while after the call; but even after the initial shock wore off and she could think a little more clearly, she didn't plan to call Charlie back and make an excuse to cancel, mainly because she wanted to be nice, if she could. At camp, Charlie hadn't seemed quite as bad as Vini had always imagined her to be.

In talking to her parents about the invitation, Vini's mother asked, "Isn't that the girl from third grade that we had to call the police on?"

"Yes," Vini responded, "but I got to know her some at camp. I think maybe she's changed some."

"People can change," her father advised, "and it's important that we give them the chance to."

On Monday morning, Vini was pleasantly surprised to discover that Mrs. Doyle had done a lot of maintenance cleaning while she was gone, so there wasn't a pile-up of stuff to do at the mansion as she thought there might be.

While dusting in one of the upstairs bedrooms, Vini briefly wondered if the invitation from Charlie might be some sort of a trick or treachery because, even though they had gotten along fairly well at camp, the girls hadn't been particularly chummy with each other. Quickly pushing the thoughts aside, Vini reminded herself that she was getting very different vibes from Charlie than she used to, completely the reverse actually. She also reminded herself that she had always had good intuition about these kinds of things, which made it very unlikely that Charlie was up to no good. In fact, instead of treacherous, she was coming across as sincere, open, and friendly. *It's the devil causing me*

to doubt, Vini thought, because that's what he likes to do. He likes to stir up trouble, and cause people to doubt and mistrust each other.

Sam had gotten so much done on the estate grounds while Vini was gone that he was actually off for a couple of days. Taking a stroll in the gardens after lunch, she admired the progress of the trees, shrubs, flowerbeds...everything was certainly looking very healthy, perky, and neat.

Tuesday at work passed as smoothly as Monday, and Vini hurried home to pack a small bag for the sleepover, after which, her father drove her to Charlie's house.

Charlie lived just with her father, her mother having passed away when Charlie was a baby. Though somewhat gruff, and a little foreboding because he was very tall (six foot five inches, to be exact), Charlie's dad turned out to be a real character, very likeable, and Vini was quickly captivated by his humor and quirkiness. Indeed, even as Charlie opened the front door, he greeted Vini with a large glass coffee carafe in his hand, lid removed, from which he was actually drinking his coffee. "No sense in dirtying up a cup, when I'm going to drink the whole pot anyway," he told her.

Mr. Orr also, right away, very frankly told Vini how much trouble Charlie had been in with him when she pulled that stunt in third grade. "I want you to know that she got no allowance for three months, wasn't allowed to go anywhere for three months, had extra chores for three months, and I never again allowed her to spend any unsupervised time with that troublemaker cousin of hers, Dana, who was the one who put her up to most of that meanness. Thank goodness she's now moved out of state because, with what I hear she's up to now from my brother, I wouldn't even allow her in my house at all."

Surprised by his words, Vini didn't quite know how to respond, and she kept silent. She also didn't quite know what to think, though she did feel a little gratified that something had actually happened to Charlie after the incident. And it now seemed understandable as to why she had changed over the years. With her dad keeping tight reins on her, how could she not? Even if she did occasionally do something wrong, such as cheating at swim races to try to impress popular girls, Charlie now seemed to Vini to be an okay sort of person, like with just the normal

faults that everyone has, and not such magnified ones as Vini had always imagined.

Leading Vini to her room, Charlie seemed a little embarrassed by what her dad had said so, of course, Vini wasn't going to bring anything up about it. Instead, she admired Charlie's stuffed animals, figurines, and various other trinkets to try to help put her at ease. The girls, it seemed, had a lot of the same kinds of collectibles. And by the looks of the bookshelf in Charlie's room, they both liked to read the same kinds of books, mostly mysteries and fantasies. Charlie also had several mythology books, which she said Vini could borrow any time.

Dinner ended up being pretty amazing, and oddly dainty to have been prepared by such a gruff and large man, each plate consisting of an elegant individual quiche with two grilled asparagus spears crisscrossing the top, a little pile of glazed carrots which turned out to be the most delicious carrots Vini had ever eaten, and a twice-baked potato with the potatoes piped back into the skins in a fancy swirled design. And everything had been made from scratch. Though Mr. Orr was actually a contractor by trade, his hobby was gourmet cooking; and it seemed this love for cooking ran in the family. "Charlie did the carrots and the filling for the quiches," Mr. Orr said.

While Vini had thought that Mrs. Doyle's black forest cake was the best dessert she had ever eaten, Mr. Orr's baked Alaska was actually better, and made more of a statement, set on the table, spectacularly flaming away in front of them. In fact, it was, literally, too pretty to eat. However, they did manage to eat it; and for as scrumptious as it turned out to be, Vini was very glad that they had. Charlie had evidently made the meringue for the dessert.

"I didn't know you could cook," Vini told Charlie. "I mean, not like that. You must have been pretty disappointed by the food at camp."

"It wasn't bad," Charlie responded, "just a little plain for my taste. Instead of regular college, I think I might go to culinary school. I'd like to be a chef and maybe do catering."

"She'll probably go to both schools, if I have anything to say about it," Mr. Orr interjected, "or at least take some business courses. She'll need some good business sense in the culinary field, particularly if she ever wants to open her own restaurant or run a catering company."

Mr. Orr wouldn't let Vini and Charlie help with the cleaning up after dinner. "No, no, I appreciate the offer, but I want you to have fun on your sleepover," he told them.

With a good two hours left before dark, the girls decided to go to a park down the street from Charlie's house, where they played on the swing sets and climbed around in the forts for a bit.

Surprisingly, for being a summer evening, the park was nearly deserted. In fact, for their whole time swinging and climbing, they saw only one other person, a man walking his dog near the pavilion at the opposite end of the park from the swings and forts, which were tucked into a fairly-secluded and heavily-treed corner of the recreational area.

The girls were sitting in the swings and talking when Vini suddenly had a very strange feeling that something extremely powerful (an unfamiliar something) was very nearby. Instantly recognizing this as the same mysterious presence she had puzzled over at camp just after they had the encounter with the wild boars, her eyes warily scanned the area. An enormous oak tree sat about hundred feet in front of and slightly to the left of the girls' location, and when Vini's gaze fell on the trunk, she noticed something that seemed out of place. The trunk looked thicker than it should have been, nearly twice as thick actually.

As she focused on the oddity, and as it came into better focus, Vini's mouth fell open as she was able to make out a giant bird sitting directly next to the oak trunk. Being similar in coloring to the trunk, and standing very still, the creature blended in perfectly to look just like part of the tree. Only in staring at the exact spot for a prolonged period of time had Vini been able to make out the outline of the bird, which still looked like part of the tree until it stretched one of its wings slightly, the movement being a further clue that she was not simply looking at a life-like statue, but a real bird that, while sitting, was even taller than Charlie's dad.

Though hawk-like in shape, the bird was unlike any creature Vini had ever seen, not just in size, but also in coloring. Overall, it was a super-dark grayish brown, which is why it had blended in with the tree trunk so well. But the gray-brown of the bird somehow held a sheen of deep purple and blue that almost looked black, and could have perhaps been likened to a colorful version of a hazy patch of midnight forest under a cloud-covered and moonless sky. The wing tips and tail

feathers were a very dark and smoky gray with hints of emerald green in them. The long claws and shiny beak of the bird were a purplish-black color, and its eyes looked like huge hunks of polished obsidian.

Though Charlie did not initially seem surprised by the gigantic bird, the moment Tulko landed beside the creature—very quickly, and appearing to Charlie as though he had just materialized there—her mouth instantly fell open to match Vini’s. Both girls’ faces had also gone somewhat pale.

After a few additional moments of startled silence, both Vini and Charlie said at exactly the same time, “What is that?”

And as Charlie answered, “A thunderbird,” Vini, at the very same moment, replied, “A wind horse.”

Managing to find her voice again first, Charlie asked, “What’s a wind horse?”

In responding, Vini discovered that it was somewhat hard to find an answer to Charlie’s question, but not necessarily because she was unnerved in seeing a thunderbird for the first time, especially this close, and one that was looking rather severely at her. It was more that she didn’t quite yet know exactly what Tulko was, so her description was going to have to be her best guess. “A wind horse...” she began slowly, “...is a magical creature that uses wind and is maybe partly or wholly made of wind. I think.”

Tulko, while he had been somewhat near the park, had only decided to show himself because he wanted to let the thunderbird know he was around and keeping watch on Vini.

It didn’t take Vini long to figure out that the thunderbird obviously knew Charlie. Indeed, in a manner similar to Tulko’s connection to Vini, the thunderbird felt it was his responsibility to look after Charlie. In truth, in the meadow at camp, he had arrived only a split second after Tulko and Valo had. But since the wind horses had things well under control, he hadn’t seen any need to show himself.

“His name is Lyydu,” Charlie said, leading Vini to the thunderbird.

“This is Tulko,” Vini told Charlie.

While Charlie was comfortable reaching out to stroke Tulko’s neck, probably because she was used to being around real horses, Vini was reluctant to touch the thunderbird, particularly because Charlie, though comfortable touching Lyydu herself, couldn’t absolutely assure Vini

that he wouldn't peck or bite her. "He's not a particularly friendly creature," she told Vini, reaching out to pat Lyydu's head. "But I don't think he's supposed to be. I was really scared of him at first, but now I'm not."

In the end, Vini did find enough bravery to slowly reach out and touch the thunderbird, gently running one hand along his shoulder just above his left wing. Alive with a power that was almost like a faint charge of electricity, Lyydu's feathers were soft and very warm, but of a different kind of softness and warmth than Tulko's coat; at least, it felt different to the touch, which Vini thought was probably due to the difference in feeling magical feathers, as opposed to magical hair.

Lyydu blinked slowly several times as Vini petted him, and seemed to be enjoying the attention in a calm and accepting sort of way.

"It's okay," Charlie said happily in relief. "I think he likes you."

"Have you ridden on him?" Vini asked. "I mean, does he take you flying?"

"Once," Charlie answered. "But I'm not sure I like flying much."

Taking the girls somewhat by surprise, both Tulko and Lyydu abruptly departed, at exactly the same time, Tulko leaving a brief swirling trail of shimmering colors behind him, while the only evidence of the thunderbird's exit was a faint rustling swish of the leaves and grasses under the oak tree. However, Lyydu did actually leave something unseen behind, something like a rumble of thunder which could not be heard but which Vini felt inside her, in her very core, as though her chest and stomach were perhaps hearing the rumble instead of her ears. Charlie had felt the rumble too, but was so used to it she hardly noticed. Plus, having never seen a wind horse before, she had been slightly more fascinated with and focused on Tulko.

The sudden disappearance of the magical pair was understandable because a couple with two children was fast approaching the area of the swings and forts.

Walking back to Charlie's house, the girls were fairly quiet, both still in a slight state of surprise over the events of the evening so far.

From a lengthy pre-sleep conversation, Vini discovered that Charlie was on a quest somewhat similar to hers, but not one to find a unicorn. Instead, she simply wanted to become a better person and maybe do some good in the world. "I'm kind of tired of hearing about all of the

bad in the world,” she told Vini. “I want to make real progress in being a better person. I get pretty mad at myself sometimes when I backslide. And I want to be closer to God in the future,” she added. “I’m pretty sure that’s how I ended up finding the thunderbird. I hadn’t really ever gone to church much, but I went once, back in May. I didn’t really understand everything, but when I came back I said a prayer. Then I was just looking in the bible and a verse just jumped out at me, like literally, like it just flew off the page and hit me in my eyeballs. It was John1:5. ‘The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.’”

Vini smiled because she was familiar with this verse, and it was definitely one of her favorites.

“I had been feeling so depressed about everything going on in the world,” Charlie went on, “especially all the bad things you hear about on the news (this definitely struck a chord with Vini), but this verse made me realize that the world is not too far gone. All is not lost. There is still hope. We can still make some sort of difference.” With an almost angelic look on her face, she finished with, “Then I started finding all sorts of passages in the bible about hope, along with a few that were scary about hellfire that made me realize how glad I was that I started looking into all of this. Then I went to the park, and there was Lyydu.”

“I couldn’t even see him at first,” Vini admitted.

Nodding, Charlie said, “That happened to me the first time too. I felt him before I ever saw him; it was really eerie. Now I can see him right away, even from a good distance; but that might be because I can feel him ahead of time, so I know he’s there and I know what to look for.”

“That’s the same with me and Tulko,” Vini said.

“Even though I was scared of Lyydu at first,” Charlie went on, “and it took a while for us to warm up to each other, we’re definitely friends now. I definitely trust him, even with my life.”

Vini was again smiling because she felt the same way about Tulko, though he hadn’t particularly scared her at first, other than maybe a little the first time he shot up into the sky with her on his back.

“I wasn’t even sure why the thunderbird was here, or what I was supposed to do, at first,” Charlie admitted. “But I think I know now.

He's here to help me, help me make real progress, and make some sort of difference in the world. And even though we haven't done anything grand and exciting yet, I'm pretty sure we will someday. I think I probably have some things to learn first before that can happen."

"Tulko and I have done a couple of things," Vini said, "but I'm sure we're supposed to do a lot more in the future too. In fact, I think God sent him to help me find a unicorn. Unicorns can travel really fast, and so can Tulko. I think maybe he's going to help me catch up to one someday. That's my hope, anyway. And I'm pretty sure it's what God intends because I've been getting some messages, supernatural messages, kind of like the one you got when the words jumped out of the bible. I'm sure God sent Tulko to me, just like He sent the thunderbird to you. And I'm pretty sure I'm meant to find a unicorn because unicorns are creatures that can bring good things back into the world, and that's my goal."

"If Lyydu and I can help you, we will," Charlie offered.

With a nod, Vini said, "That might be just the reason we were meant to become friends, even though we weren't before. Sometimes it takes teamwork to make things happen." After a brief pause, she added, "I'm glad you called me."

"I almost didn't," Charlie replied. "I thought you might hang up on me, or say no to coming, not just because of third grade, which I am very sorry for, but because of the cheating at camp. That was really stupid of me. I guess I just wanted to try to get those girls to be my friends. But they wouldn't have been very good friends, I'm sure. I feel very guilty about the cheating, and I'm really mad at myself about that."

"I get really mad at myself sometimes too," Vini admitted. "But we have to forgive ourselves and move on, and just try to do better."

Nodding, Charlie said, "Anyway, my dad encouraged me to call you when I told him we were cabin mates at camp. He said it might be a good chance to make a good friend, a real friend. He's always telling me to make better friends."

Even though it was a little hard for her to get up so early in the summer, Charlie rode with her dad to take Vini to work the next morning. In the car, the girls made plans to go swimming together on Saturday at the spring-fed pool. If Charlie's dad could drop her off at

Vini's house in the morning, Vini thought her mom would be able to bring her home in the afternoon.

As they were slowly winding their way down Paloma Drive, Vini gave a brief wave to Mr. Galloway, already hard at work in his garden for the day, and in the process of sculpting another topiary. Vini had some difficulty seeing exactly what he was doing, but it looked like he might be making a gigantic butterfly out of two side-by-side privets. How fun! Vini couldn't wait to see how it would turn out.

With Mr. Orr turning at the corner in order to drop Vini off by the side gate, gazing out of the windows at the large house and extensive gardens, Charlie said, "Wow, you work here? It's amazing."

"Well, I'll see you Saturday," Vini said, gathering her overnight bag and backpack, and a package of homemade oatmeal raisin cookies Mr. Orr was sending home with her, as she opened the door.

Sam was already at work, so Vini took a small detour out into the gardens to say hello before going inside. She also complimented him on some of the progress he had made. Though polite and friendly, Sam didn't seem quite as friendly toward Vini as he had been before she went to camp. Instead, he seemed more businesslike, and slightly distant. Deciding not to take it personally, Vini thought, *He's probably just got a lot on his mind, like we all do.*

Inside the house, first thing, heading downstairs so that she could assess things and start making a basement-cleaning plan, Vini caught a glimpse of Pizzo, who was standing next to the liquid soap container on the counter by the sink, and scowling, as he looked around for possible things to throw at Vini, if he thought she might be about to step a toe out of line, at least, out of what he thought the line should be.

In pretty much ignoring him (other than a brief glance in his direction), Vini hoped to avoid any unpleasantness in the encounter. The strategy worked because Pizzo pretty much preferred it when the people in the house ignored him, excepting Louetta, of course.

The basement was pretty dirty, much dirtier than the attic had been. *Further evidence that dirt works its way down from top to bottom*, Vini decided. She wouldn't be starting on the basement today, and possibly not even this week; but it was good that she had taken a peek because it often helped her, with big jobs anyway, to make a plan in her mind first. And her mind did indeed start planning for the basement project during

the rest of the morning, while she was cleaning two of the bathrooms and dust mopping the upper floors.

While working, Vini found her mind occupied with other things as well—the hippotherapy program, Pizzo, what she might want out of the refrigerator for lunch, her unicorn research, and the upcoming Saturday plans with Charlie.

As if discovering wind horses was not enough for one summer, it had been a mindboggling couple of weeks. Not only had Vini never expected to see a thunderbird, she even less expected to end up friends with a former enemy. God was certainly teaching her something, namely, that she shouldn't assume anything and that there really were no limits, not only no limits to God (which Vini already knew), but very few limits as to what she herself might be capable of accomplishing with His help. In considering this lesson, she realized she needed to stretch the limits of her thinking, and her imagination even. Although she had always had a vivid imagination, she never thought certain things she was dreaming of could be part of real life. Yet, here they were, and even more than she might have imagined. And it seemed that old saying, "The sky's the limit," didn't even apply to Vini because, with Tulko's help, she could literally soar even higher than the sky.

In the afternoon, Vini helped Mrs. Doyle make peach butter with peaches harvested from a small grove on the estate. Her arm getting stronger by the day, Mrs. Doyle didn't need much help, other than with lifting a heavy pot; but Vini found the canning process fascinating, so she stayed to watch and help as much as she could. "Oh yes," Mrs. Doyle said, "I love, love, love peach butter—on pancakes, waffles, toast, biscuits, pretty much anything. But, of course, the trees don't make peaches in the winter, so I have to put up as much as possible during the summer."

On Thursday, Vini did start some of the cleaning in the basement because things were pretty well caught up everywhere else. And Mrs. Doyle had said that it was not yet time to do the fans, shutters, tops of doorways, and all of the library shelves again because they were usually only done every three or four months, the dust being not as noticeable on them as on other surfaces like coffee tables, dressers, and such that pretty much needed dusting every week.

In the evening, after getting back from an outing with Tulko, during which they had stopped another mugging, this time of an elderly couple, Vini wondered if Tulko perhaps knew ahead of time that certain things were about to happen, like a premonition. He had flown Vini to the exact spot of the couple, who were walking home from attending a high school play, just before the muggers appeared. Or, instead of some kind of advance warning, was he somehow able to sense strong emotions, like the negative energy and mindsets of the criminals, and was that what drew him to investigate? If that were true, the distress of the treed kitten made sense, as a beacon. But how could Tulko have known that a man was about to fall from a ladder? *That seems like divine forewarning to me*, Vini thought, again deciding firmly that God was definitely guiding all of this closely, including the exact instincts and actions of the wind horse.

Changing into pajamas, Vini found her mind on something else from the latest outing as well. As Tulko was flying slowly over a large church on their way back to Vini's house, she thought she saw one of the gargoyles on the church roof move. With the movement being very slight, she decided it was possible that her eyes were playing tricks on her in the dark, particularly because there wasn't much moonlight or starlight to see by.

Just before bedtime, glancing at her unicorn calendar hanging on the door to her closet, she realized that over half the summer was gone already. Life certainly seemed like a whirlwind lately, and literally sometimes, as far as having Tulko around.

Looking in her dresser mirror while brushing her hair, she could still see the calendar because her closet door was standing open, putting the calendar not only in direct view but also closer to the mirror. The July unicorn seemed to be staring right at her, and his eyes suddenly reminded Vini of her own eyes. Turning to view the unicorn more closely, then again studying her own eyes in the mirror to compare, she suddenly remembered that old saying, "The eyes are the window to the soul."

The "soul" part of the saying made her thoughts reach for something hidden in her brain—something called soul shadows. She had come across this term in one of the books borrowed from Mrs. Doyle. However, that particular day, distracted by busyness, she had

been reading somewhat hurriedly and not taking notes. She now wished she had because she felt sure it was important and, offhand, she couldn't even remember which book it had been in. Now, something was definitely nagging at her, and telling her to find the book again and reread.

But it wasn't just the saying that had started this line of thinking. Something about the mirror and the reflection had actually triggered it, perhaps something about seeing a reflection of a unicorn in water. *Even if unicorns can't very often be seen by the naked eye*, Vini thought, *maybe their reflections are visible in pools of water*. Many of the books she was reading associated unicorns with water, so it certainly seemed possible. However, while this idea seemed feasible, she also felt that her thoughts had wandered off to something she had read well after coming across the term, soul shadows.

Forcing her brain backwards, she struggled to recall a string of paragraphs about unicorns taking up residence inside human beings, in their very souls. *Or was it that our souls, if given a form, might look like unicorns?* This was maddening for Vini, not being able to remember clearly what she had read, and she did so wish she had taken notes. Shaking her head and privately scolding herself, she recalled something else on the subject. *We can't see our souls because they are so large, absolutely huge, each one being larger than the whole world. So if we try to imagine what they might look like, a person might envision a unicorn, because it's something our minds and eyes can comprehend*. Vini shook her head again because she realized that she was probably confusing what she had read with something she had learned from a guest speaker at a recent bible study.

Vini had started to call these little snippets of information about unicorns, when they were this muddled, snoppets. *Grrrr*, she thought, *it's not just that I have trouble understanding these snoppets, I can't even remember them*.

Rather than continue with the current muddle in her brain, Vini pushed aside these thoughts, in the hopes that the whole thing would seem clearer in the morning, after having a chance to sleep on it.

At breakfast the next morning, Vini's mother mentioned to her father that Uncle Tim and Aunt Carol were having a lot of money troubles. "Their spending is just so out of control, compared to their

incomes,” Mrs. Aberdeen said. “That recent trip to Germany and Austria really did it.”

“Or just having all those piles of handbags, sunglasses, scarves, belts, shoes...not to mention all the jewelry,” Vini’s father remarked. “They’re in so much debt from that kind of stuff, no wonder they can’t pay their bills.”

“Tim says he’s taking on a second job,” her mother added. “It’s sad; they won’t be seeing each other much if he does. And what’s the point of being married if you hardly ever see each other.”

Vini almost couldn’t believe she was hearing this because it tied in perfectly with what she had started thinking about the previous night, the exact lesson of the bible study, which was that no amount of things or even experiences can make human beings truly happy or fulfilled. “There are not enough things in the whole world to satisfy the soul,” Vini remarked to her parents, “because the soul is so much larger than the world, so large, in fact, that absolutely nothing in the world can fill it up.” Happy that she had correctly remembered the main point of the lesson, she finished with, “Only God can fill the soul, because of His infiniteness.”

Smiling, her mother responded in agreement. “I think that’s completely true. I just wish Tim and Carol would figure that out. They’d be a lot happier.”

Looking up gargoyles in Mrs. Doyle’s library during a break on Friday Vini discovered that the creatures were nothing to fear, mostly being good, not bad, and often acting as protectors. Of course, Vini didn’t fear as much now as she used to, especially in making it a habit to remember that God was with her all of the time. In having discovered that magical creatures were both real and not just a thing of the past, she now seemed to be seeing them everywhere, even on church rooftops. Still marveling over Lydyu, and to some extent Pizzo as well, Vini wasn’t sure why she was so surprised in discovering even more of a magical world right under her very nose. She should be learning by now to expect the unexpected. However, realizing how easy it would be to get sidetracked in her research—because thunderbirds, puck trolls, and even gargoyles were probably very interesting, and because Mrs. Doyle’s library was sure to have lots of information on them—Vini

forced herself to focus. She would need to concentrate on unicorns, if she ever hoped to find one.

While paying Vini on Friday afternoon, Mrs. Doyle was fretting. It seemed it was her turn to host a dinner party for a group of ladies from one of the clubs she belonged to, and the dinner was scheduled for a week from Saturday.

“Violet usually manages these things for me,” Mrs. Doyle said. “She’s such a good cook. Except for a few fancy desserts that I learned from my mother, I’m just an ordinary cook.”

Vini could definitely empathize, since she herself wasn’t very good at cooking.

“The menu is actually more than a little ambitious for me,” Mrs. Doyle went on, “but I don’t want to dumb it down. The other girls always put on such elaborate affairs; I would hate to fall short when it’s my turn to host. Could you possibly stay a little later next Friday to help me prep?” she asked, hopefully. “Then, maybe come Saturday afternoon too, and stay to serve and help clean up after?”

“Sure,” Vini answered, “no problem.”

“But only if you have time and want the extra money.” Mrs. Doyle added. “I don’t want to ruin the rest of your summer; you’ve been working so hard. If you don’t want to do it, I’ll call a service.”

Suddenly thinking of Charlie, who wasn’t doing anything particular this summer as far as she knew, Vini said, “You know, I have a friend who is really good at cooking, and she could probably use the extra money. I’d still come, to help her, but you don’t have to pay me.”

(Using the word “friend” to describe Charlie had seemed very natural and very true, though it was still somewhat of a surprise in Vini’s mind that this had turned out to be so.)

“I don’t mind paying you both for the work,” Mrs. Doyle responded. “And we could definitely use the extra set of hands, not to mention someone with expertise. I have ten ladies coming. It seems I am going to end up using the good china after all,” she further mused. “But don’t worry. I’ll get it out and cleaned before then.”

Now feeling relieved, and a good deal more relaxed, Mrs. Doyle walked out with Vini to as far as the side gate, telling her, “I’m usually more organized about these kinds of things, but I’ve been a little distracted lately, what with the arm, and getting behind with a few

things. Albert and Louetta aren't coming until the week after the dinner," she added, "or I would have recruited them to help. I'm anxious for you to meet them, by the way."

"I'll be seeing my friend tomorrow morning," Vini said. "I can call you in the afternoon to let you know if she says yes. Whether or not she wants to come, I'll definitely plan on doing it, so you won't need to call a service."

"In that case, you can just wait until Monday morning to tell me," Mrs. Doyle responded. "There's no sense in interrupting your weekend to make a phone call."

Super early on Saturday, Vini was up as usual before the rest of her family, and Tulko was taking her for a short ride. He had noticed how much Vini liked the horses at the camp, so he wanted to take her riding just for fun too, and not just always for work like stopping muggers and rescuing accident-prone people on ladders. While soaring about, they made a brief visit to Miss Peachy at the camp corral, who was overjoyed not only to see Vini again, but also to have a visit from a wind horse other than Valo.

High up into the clouds once more, Vini and Tulko passed several groups of wind horses drinking from swirling pools of blue and gray cloud strings (otherwise known as cloud ponds) nestled into the very tops of dense patches of fluffy white clouds. *Wow, there must be lots of wind horses*, Vini thought. Dara and Valo were not even among any of the groups, so these were all new faces she was seeing.

Looking down to the earth, Vini marveled at how beautiful and peaceful it looked, and simply amazing as far as colors, variety, details, and other such intricacies. *What an artist God is*, she thought, *and He certainly did a fabulous job on this, like even more magnificent than a masterpiece.*

With the protection and power of Tulko surrounding her, and with being so high up in the air (which added a bit of giddiness to her normally-reserved personality), Vini suddenly felt a little like a superhero, particularly because some of their outings so far had involved helping others. Recalling the recent things she had done, especially in comparison to being such a wimp in the past, she started to feel like she could just about conquer the whole world. And now having such a power growing inside her, who knows what she might

end up accomplishing. Her mind full of recent successes and plans for the future, and her insides all puffed up with feelings of confidence, she suddenly heard a very small (but somewhat loud) voice in the back of her mind. *Be careful.*

Quickly recognizing that what she was feeling was something very close to pride, she tried to calm herself down, to more normal levels of confidence and hope in the future.

As she forced herself to deflate from feeling powerful, Proverbs 16:18 came to mind. “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”

I definitely don't want to fall, especially not from this high up, she joked with herself, before a more serious thought occurred to her. *Pride and arrogance are responsible for a lot of people's downfalls.*

Although she hadn't been particularly haughty or prideful, she recognized that what she had been feeling was something that could lead to this destructive state of mind. *This is God's power, not mine,* she reminded herself. *I am totally dependent on Him. I can't do anything good without Him, no one can.*

Feeling more like her true self, she recalled something she had read in a theology book once—that people are in much closer connection to God when they live in the present, focused on their current situation and actions, and not overly focused on either the past or the future. Though she hadn't really understood what it meant at the time, the concept suddenly made sense. “I can't dwell on the past, good or bad, because it's already happened and can't be changed,” she told Tulko. “And I shouldn't make too many plans for the future because I can't know what the future might hold, only God knows, and I don't want to force a path in the wrong direction. I'd rather be led, so I can stay on the right path.” *We can make all the plans in the world,* her mind added, *but then life takes all sorts of odd twists and turns and those plans don't happen. It's better to trust in God, and follow, rather than jump ahead and possibly be disappointed, or make mistakes that might end up being hard to live with.*

With over an hour left until Charlie was due to arrive, after having breakfast and putting her swimsuit on under her t-shirt and shorts, Vini picked up the bible. As it fell open in her hands, Proverbs 16:9 jumped out at her. “A man's mind plans his way, but the LORD directs his

steps.” Although these words hadn’t actually hit her in the “eyeballs” as Charlie had described, she was sure this was a message meant for her, especially since it perfectly fit with what she had been pondering high in the clouds.

Swimming with Charlie ended up being a lot of fun. Vini had been right in thinking that they were becoming friends, and likely good friends. Charlie definitely wanted to help out at the mansion for Mrs. Doyle’s fancy dinner party. “This is just the way to get good experience, and possibly good references, for the future,” she told Vini. Charlie also advised her to bring dark pants (black, if possible) and a plain white shirt to change into for the serving of the dinner. “That’s what’s usually expected of servers,” she added. “But since we’ll be doing the cooking too, we’ll wait until right before the dinner to change, so we don’t get anything splattered on our nice white shirts.”

After a yummy lunch at Vini’s house of homemade macaroni and cheese and green beans, Mrs. Aberdeen drove Charlie home. Vini rode along, and went in with her mother who briefly wanted to meet Charlie’s father so that she would have a face to put with the name for the future.

Mr. Orr seemed please about the plans for Charlie to help out for the dinner, and said he wouldn’t have any problem driving her to and from the mansion both Friday and Saturday, since his work schedule was generally very flexible, particularly when he had this much advance notice.

On Monday morning, Vini discovered that Mrs. Doyle had cleaned out three enormous filing cabinets over the weekend, which precipitated Vini sitting before a paper shredder and shredding for pretty much the whole day. Now used to being a lot more active, on the walk home, she felt a little cross from having sat still for so long.

Even more tense and cranky at home in the evening, from having to put up with several hours of Preston’s most annoying antics, she actually lost her temper and yelled at him, and slammed the door upon entering her bedroom when her mother scolded her for yelling. Vini was actually mad at her mom, feeling it was greatly unfair that Preston was not only allowed to do annoying things, but that her mother was also letting him completely get away with it.

Picking up her bible in an effort to calm down, and letting it fall open in her hands, she read the first thing her eyes met, Proverbs 16:32. “He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit better than he who takes a city.”

Closing her bible, she again let it fall open in her hands, whereupon, she read Colossians 3:12-13. “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.”

Since Preston was fond of acting out just to get attention, and her mother was probably doing the right thing in ignoring him, Vini realized she had been wrong both in yelling at Preston and in being annoyed with her mother who had been right too in reprimanding Vini for losing her temper.

Saying a quick prayer asking God for forgiveness, she again opened the bible and read Proverbs 19:11. “Good sense makes a man slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.”

Feeling much more relaxed and a good deal less cranky, Vini picked up one of Mrs. Doyle’s books.

In reading something about thunderbirds having control over certain aspects of weather, Vini wondered if God might use wind horses in this way too, either to control the weather or to make certain weather events happen, like maybe sand storms or tornadoes. *If He has helpers for other things that happen in the world, why not the weather too?* She also pondered that these “helpers” might have been the way He designed everything to work from the start, like the workings of an elaborate clock. If God designed something like a clock to control certain things in the universe, then magical horses might be a part of it, in the same way the gears or springs would work inside a clock.

Reading on, she found an entry describing how the sounds of dragons and thunderbirds and such like could occasionally be heard in the world of today, but the creatures never allowed themselves to be seen because they didn’t trust human beings.

Still further on, another passage caught her eye because it was something she had read before that definitely rang true, about how unicorns help people see the truth behind certain situations.

“Using their ability to communicate by thought, unicorns will convey messages to human beings who have experienced misfortunes or who hear about troubling events that are greatly saddening. The recipient of the information transmitted by thought will not hear words; rather, the person will suddenly realize that if he or she hadn’t had the misfortune, or if the troubling event hadn’t happened, something much more unfortunate or troubling would have occurred. Sometimes, the information given is very specific, such as that a person avoided a particular form of accident. However, more often it is not specific, and the subject will simply feel relieved, and will count his or her ‘lucky stars’ that nothing worse happened. This is the subtle nature of perhaps the unicorn’s most powerful gift.”

Absentmindedly flipping through the rest of the book, her eyes chanced to see a map of Italy spanning two pages, which made her once again think about reasons Tulko might have come into her life. In addition to helping her catch up to a unicorn, his speed could help her travel great distances, to other countries even, if needed.

Seeing another cloud shadow on the walk to work that looked exactly like the shape of Italy, Vini smiled in realizing that her brain was gradually figuring things out, as far as what she and Tulko were probably meant to do, and she wondered if possibly they were meant to travel to Italy someday. *Without further information, I can’t just set off to Italy*, she told herself. *I need to have patience and wait for God’s lead.* He was definitely answering Vini’s questions, but in His own time, of course, and she didn’t intend to rush Him.

Friday came about quickly, and Charlie arrived at the mansion just after lunch to help with the prep work for the Saturday dinner.

With Mrs. Doyle off to the grocery store to pick up a few items, and Sam done and gone for the day, the girls talked freely while they worked, and Vini mentioned that she had found a few things about thunderbirds in her research.

“I could ask Mrs. Doyle if you could borrow some of her books too, if you want,” Vini offered. “I think she likes her books to get read, so I don’t think she would mind.”

“My main goal right now is to grow to be a better person,” Charlie said, before adding jokingly, “Do you think there’s anything in her mythology books about that?”

“They might help you find some answers,” Vini replied. “I’ve been surprised by what I’ve found out about unicorns, and myself, in doing my research.”

“All kidding aside, I feel very guilty about the past sometimes,” Charlie said thoughtfully. “To tell you the truth, going to church that time in May wasn’t the beginning of all of this for me. I went to a bible retreat over spring break, and it really got me thinking about things. Since then, I’ve been trying to do better, but I don’t really know what to do to make progress. For one thing, the retreat didn’t go over any basics. It was kind of like they thought everybody would have the basics and would already be automatically all connected to God and everything. I just kind of went along with everything, but some of it didn’t make much sense. I do want to learn more. That’s why I went to church. But I only went that one time.”

“Start going to church regularly,” Vini advised. “Or, if you don’t feel comfortable with that yet, just read the bible.”

“I haven’t read the bible much,” Charlie confessed, “because I don’t really understand what I am reading. It’s like it’s written in some foreign language, even though I know it’s really in English. I just don’t get what it’s trying to say.”

“There are different versions of the bible, and some are easier to read than others,” Vini said. “Plus, that’s what bible study is for, to help you understand. I didn’t understand at first either. And I still don’t always understand. That’s why I keep going.”

“Maybe I could come to your church sometime, to a service and a bible study,” Charlie said hopefully.

“I’d like that,” Vini replied.

Charlie left slightly earlier than Vini, who wanted to give the dining room a little extra cleaning before the dinner. While dusting the high-backed chairs, and marveling at how it no longer felt odd talking to and making plans with someone she once considered to be a mortal enemy, she thought, *Life seldom turns out how we expect. And I’m not sure we should want it to.*

Late afternoon on Saturday, in finishing up with the final cooking and other last-minute details (with Vini and Mrs. Doyle mostly trying to stay out of Charlie's way in the kitchen, because she obviously had things well in hand), Vini briefly worried that Pizzo might show up and spoil the party somehow. She needn't have worried, because he never did this. Not only did he enjoy parties at the mansion, whether invited or not, they never inconvenienced him; and the leftovers often pleased him, if they were puck-troll yummy, that is, which these were sure to be.

The ladies at the party reminded Vini of those attending an Easter service at church, half wearing fancy hats, all spectacularly dressed, some in obviously vintage clothing that looked as though it might have been borrowed from a queen or a duchess.

The whole dinner went off very smoothly, which was an incredible relief for Vini. Charlie didn't seem surprised; but, then, she hadn't been nearly as nervous as Vini had been.

After the dessert course was served, and before clearing and cleaning up, Vini and Charlie had a meal in the kitchen that was pretty much identical to the one they had served, basically the only differences being slightly smaller portions and served on everyday dinnerware instead of fancy china.

Paying Vini and Charlie, Mrs. Doyle was fairly giddy from the success of the party, not to mention the amount of sherry she had consumed.

As it was getting dark outside, Tulko, nearby, was planning to fly Vini to her house; however, he found he didn't need to because Mr. Orr, waiting for Charlie by the side gate, ended up driving Vini home. She was safe for the night, which greatly contented Tulko who had a particular reason for being worried because something had just happened in the spiritual world, that had come to him in the form of evil vibes and that had set his instincts into fierce protection mode, something Vini herself would shortly become aware of.

Chapter Ten

Fanning Fire

The whole time Vini was helping Charlie cook and serve, and while they were enjoying their dinner, Satan was up to something as well, something very like cooking in that he was stewing, fuming, boiling, and stirring things up.

The stewing started when he became aware of the prospect of an avalanche of good on the near-future horizon, one that would be started by a mere girl, and one that was sure to happen if she continued on her current path. And, of course, this was completely unacceptable. Light snowfall, fine, even a short blizzard, maybe, but an avalanche—No!

The fuming came upon discovering that this particular girl was one he had previously completely dismissed as being capable of aiding the Creator (also known as the Enemy) in any way. Just about kicking himself for not recognizing earlier how this mere infant of a person could threaten him, as far as shifting the tide of souls from the worldly path leading to hell to the golden path leading to heaven, Satan's fuming turned to boiling. *Spoiled rotten brat! Favored child of God! He gave her wind horses!! Who gives a mere child that kind of power? Doesn't He know she could abuse the power?*

Realizing he had just hit on a possible way to prevent or at least divert the avalanche, his boiling dialed itself back to a simmer, and several plans began stirring in his mind, the first of which would be a direct plan, one that would lead to her early death, thus preventing her from having much impact on the tide of souls he was collecting. If that plan failed, he would then work on diverting the girl herself, a task that might have proved easier if he had noticed this *Nasty infection!* (again fuming) much earlier. She was, of course, infected by God, and infected in such a way that she could now no longer be *cured*.

I almost wish I could take the less-direct path, Satan mused. What fun it would be to tempt her into abusing the power given to her so that God would take it away and so that he, Satan, could enjoy watching her

distress over the loss, complete with regrets, guilt, and further pain in beating herself up over the personal shortcomings that had led to God's discipline of her. *But this would be far too risky. What if she couldn't be tempted?* It was maddening to Satan that he couldn't read her thoughts. In fact, the only way he had recognized the threat was in hearing her speak one of her prayers of thanks to God aloud.

The concept in general of praying aloud gave him a chuckle because, while God could hear the thoughts of his children, Satan could not. *When will humans learn that their personal communications with God can be overheard if said aloud? Stupid humans! But their stupidity is my gain.* While Satan hated hearing the prayers of praise to God (because they actually hurt him both mentally and physically), the inside information contained in the personal prayers he was listening to was a definite benefit to him. Often, this was how he gleaned valuable data on fears, hopes, sins, and other important whatnots in order to be able to foster, attack, and exploit anything and everything possible to ensure the success of his cause, which was of course to gather and condemn to hell as many souls as possible.

Turning his thoughts back to his subject, Satan reminded himself, *I can't risk taking the less-direct route. It will be better if she dies quickly, rather than be allowed to continue her work.*

Satan, of course, would not be the one directly serving up the dish he was preparing because he couldn't give any of his demons a direct order to kill one of God's children. However, he could plant a seed that would blossom to this conclusion, all while relishing the pleasure of Vini's fear and torment as a sort of appetizer to the glee he would devour upon the advent of her actual death.

While Vini was adding yeast to flour and warm water to begin making butterfly dinner rolls, Satan was beginning a process that would eventually grow to something he himself would find very scrumptious. Calling Ureg, one of his Senior Demons, to him, he simply did what he often did, which was vent.

For nearly fifteen minutes, Ureg listened to his Master vent, about how he hated unicorns, how dangerous they were to him, and how they couldn't be killed, at least, not by any of his means.

Ureg, having never seen a unicorn, and not able to imagine how to find one, much less harm or capture one, simply listened, collecting the

information. However, the moment his Master began speaking about the girl, his brain began churning, rather than just storing the information; and by the time he was dismissed ten minutes later, Ureg had a pretty good idea as to what he should do with what he had heard during the venting session.

Satan, in blowing off steam, was also fanning a flame, namely the flame of evil inside the demon, and particularly in the demon's brain, which was not nearly as large as that of a human; therefore, it needed a lot of fuel, and some stoking, to get it to work properly. Fortunately, Ureg was one servant who could manage to use his somewhat inferior brain fairly well. Indeed, the Senior Demon was already making a plan, the first step of which was to call one of his most powerful Subordinate Demons, Kugari, to him to give him a direct assignment.

With Ureg explaining how the subject of the assignment was of the level *Highest Threat* to their Master's plans, Kugari's brain began making a plan of its own to rid the natural world of the nasty creature known as Vini Aberdeen.

Satan, of course, was pleased with this, as he knew his servants could be very effective in carrying out what they thought were his unspoken wishes. Though demons could sometimes be lazy, sleeping for long periods of time when they should be helping their Master tempt and turn people, they were completely loyal, and often very organized in carrying out their efforts. Being created by Satan and his fellow fallen angels made demons loyal, though they had free will just like other thinking creatures, which allowed them to make poor choices on occasion. However, they could never be turned to good like creatures created by God who might have become evil somewhere along the way and then repented. This was truly one of Satan's most diabolically genius accomplishments, having been able to create creatures already corrupt to serve him, rather than simply corrupting beings already on earth. Being already corrupt and unredeemable, demons weren't particularly subject to the Rules of God, though He could of course choose to counter their actions, or kill them at any moment, which He might eventually do. But in the meantime, Satan would make full use of them to further his goals.

On Monday morning, while Vini was dusting in the parlor, she heard the hall clock begin chiming. In wondering if it was ten or eleven

o'clock, because she had lost track of time and didn't often wear a watch, she listened and counted carefully—ten, eleven, twelve...thirteen, fourteen. *Fourteen! How can it chime fourteen times? No clock ever chimes fourteen times.* Speeding out into the hall, she read the time on the fancy face as eleven o'clock. *How weird.*

Working mostly in the basement for the rest of the day, she forgot about the oddity until she was heading upstairs to the library when it was nearing time for her to go home, at which point, she heard the clock chime again. Again carefully counting, while heading to look at the clock, she heard five chimes. Noticing that the hands of the clock read exactly two o'clock, she shook her head. *The chimes must just be broken because it seems to be keeping perfect time.*

However, entering the library to get her backpack and exchange a couple of books, a small thought suddenly began ticking in the back of her brain. *What if this is another message from God? I don't want to ignore it.* She certainly thought it was possible. If He was speaking to her through tapestries and clouds, why not a clock too? Pulling out her binder, she made note of the numbers of chimes, fourteen and five, so that she would be able to remember them easily later.

On Tuesday morning, instead of cleaning, Mrs. Doyle suggested that Vini help Sam with rigging up three rain barrels outside at various gutter downspouts. The work was fun, but almost stifling because it was particularly hot in the garden, especially for it being a morning and with plenty of shade around their work areas.

At lunch, Mrs. Doyle and Sam talked about possible topiaries, as Sam had started his lessons with Mr. Galloway and was so far making a success of the training.

"Those fourteen yews are pretty close to those five privets." Sam said. "After I do the row of yew mushrooms, do you want me to make anything out of the privets, like maybe flowers or dragonflies?"

"Probably not," Mrs. Doyle responded. "The privets help screen off that strange and dark area where nothing much grows. I might want to keep them as a big screen, rather than trimming them down. But I'll think about it and let you know."

Vini's ears had perked up upon hearing the numbers fourteen and five, and she resolved to explore that part of the garden later. She hadn't really felt inspired to until now, since Mrs. Doyle had warned her

away from that corner. However, this might be the time to explore, especially if she was getting messages that were telling her to do so.

But she wouldn't be able to in the afternoon because she was helping Mrs. Doyle get the rooms ready for Albert and Louetta who would be arriving in the morning.

Needing only to change the bed sheets and do some light dusting, because the rooms were fairly clean already, Vini then helped Mrs. Doyle bake brownies and caramel pecan cookie bars, which was a lot more fun than tackling more of the basement, her original plan for the afternoon.

While they were baking, Vini asked Mrs. Doyle, "Do you want me to keep the same schedule while they're here? I remember you said once they usually help you with cleaning, so I wonder if I should make myself scarce during their visit."

"No, certainly not," Mrs. Doyle responded. "Not unless you want to, that is. I had hoped you would keep to your schedule and spend some time with them while they're here. Louetta's your age; Albert's a year older; and they're both somewhat shy, so it will be good for them to have some company. There aren't too many other kids their ages in this area. And they'll help you so you can get the cleaning done quicker, and maybe you can all have some fun while they are here, like go swimming together or something." In something of a hushed voice, as though Albert and Louetta might actually overhear, she added, "But don't expect them to be any good at the cleaning. It's their mother you see; she's a lousy housekeeper, never could keep a clean house. And she's passed this trait on to them." With Vini smiling, Mrs. Doyle finished with, "You'll like them; you'll see. They're not bad kids."

At home in the evening, letting her bible fall open in her hands in order to see if God was sending her another message, Vini chanced to read Hebrews 1:7. "Of the angels he says, 'Who makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire.'"

After puzzling over this for a bit, Vini decided it likely wasn't any sort of message. Even if the "wind" part pertained to wind horses, she couldn't decipher anything because she didn't know what the "flames of fire" part might mean.

Louetta and Albert arrived as expected Wednesday morning, and were thrilled to meet both Vini and Sam. Their parents, in dropping

them off, only came in for a few minutes to visit with Mrs. Doyle, so Vini, busy cleaning in the basement when they arrived, hadn't met them.

After lunch, while Vini was getting a little further along in the basement, Sam and Albert set up the badminton net. They also measured out and placed the hoops and stakes of the croquet set.

Not being as outdoorsy as her brother, Louetta got busy transforming the music room into her two-week art studio by dragging around a lot of canvasses and setting out drop cloths, paints, and other whatnots. Pizzo, overjoyed to have her in the mansion, helped as much as he could. Of course, it was a small sort of help, given his size. He took particular delight in rearranging her brushes for her, a task Louetta often set him to, as she knew he enjoyed it so. Plus, it kept him from spitting and throwing things whenever people happened to peek or step a toe into the music room.

At Mrs. Doyle's urging, all of the young people played croquet and badminton in the afternoon. In spending time with Sam other than for work, and as he was sharing a few details about himself with the visitors, Vini discovered that he lived with his uncle, who took him in at age three when both of his parents died in a train crash.

Sam had changed into shorts for the afternoon, since this was more comfortable than the jeans he normally wore for work, especially given how hot it was in the garden, and Vini happened to notice a long scar on his leg that looked somewhat new. It was definitely healing, but was still pink. At Vini's query, Sam said, "Oh, I cut myself at home a couple of weeks ago."

On Thursday, at Mrs. Doyle's invitation, Charlie came to the mansion late morning to borrow books and stay for lunch in order to meet Sam, Albert, and Louetta. Mrs. Doyle had made a huge pot of chili and was baking cornbread; and they would be having strawberry gelatin with lots of fruit added and whipped cream on the side.

Walking from her father's current construction site, where he and his crew were building an addition onto a strip shopping mall, about a mile from the mansion, Charlie arrived at eleven, coming through the side gate as Vini had told her to.

Greeting Vini, who had been watching for her and who ran to meet her, Charlie said, "My dad's picking me up around two."

The invitation to come had actually gone through Vini, since Mrs. Doyle didn't have Charlie's phone number. However, as Charlie greeted her in the kitchen, Mrs. Doyle pulled out a pad of paper to get Charlie's number, telling her, "I want to make sure I can reach you easily if I need to; I'm thinking about hosting a Christmas party this year. If I do, I'll certainly need your help with the food."

In exploring the library together, Vini was surprised that Charlie didn't want to borrow books relating to thunderbirds; instead, she was standing in front of a shelf of old cookbooks, looking as though she might be about to devour every one of them, and without even adding salt or pepper, or anything else to help them go down.

Mrs. Doyle brought a small box to the library, encouraging Charlie to take as many as she wanted. "Ten or so if you like; I'm certainly not using them. And you're not coming every day like Vini, so it might be harder to trade them in and out. Take enough to definitely keep you busy for a while."

Charlie did select eight books, carefully placing them into the box, which was then placed handy into the butler's pantry to be ready for her to take upon leaving.

Vini still had trouble imagining someone choosing cookbooks over ones about things like castles and dragons. *Oh well, to each his own.*

Louetta had been busy painting all morning, so Vini took Charlie to the music room to meet her, whereupon, both Vini and Charlie admired several of her paintings. Some she had done on previous visits, but had taken them out of the large storage cupboard both for inspiration and in order to do touch-ups here and there. She was currently working on a brand new one though, of a monkey swinging in a hammock and blowing bubbles with a bright purple bubble wand.

"Oh, I love this," Vini remarked, observing that the monkey looked very real, though a little comical in his swinging and bubble blowing. In fact, Louetta's style was so lifelike that the swing almost appeared to be moving, and Vini could almost smell the soap from the bubbles he was blowing.

"It is very good," Charlie agreed.

Albert happened to be passing the music room and stuck his head in to remark, "You might not think it was so good if you had to live with hundreds of paintings, all just about as big as that one."

Louetta did indeed favor large canvasses, and liked to do many projects.

Sticking her tongue out at her brother as he moved on, she told the other girls, “He’s a little cranky because he’s missing his girlfriend. He didn’t even want to come this year, but my parents made him. Honestly, he should be able to do without her for two weeks.”

Still with a little time before lunch, Charlie and Vini headed out to the gardens to see Sam’s progress on the mushroom topiaries, which were shaping up nicely, three having been completed so far.

At lunch, Vini noticed that Mrs. Doyle sometimes liked to call Louetta and Albert, Louie and Bertie, which they didn’t particularly like, but she didn’t care, having called them such since they were babies.

“It’s better than something even shorter, like Lou and Bert,” Vini said.

“I have an Aunt Lou,” Charlie said. “But her full name is Louisa. I think it’s a pretty name.”

“Sam or Samuel,” Sam told everyone, “makes no difference to me. In school, the teachers mostly call me Samuel.”

“I don’t ever use my full name,” Charlie added. “But my dad sometimes calls me Charlene when he’s like scolding me.”

“Mine is Lavinia,” Vini said, “at least that’s what’s on my birth certificate. It’s a name from mythology, and it’s pretty, but I’ve never been called that. I’m not sure why. It just doesn’t seem to fit when said aloud.”

It seemed everyone but Mrs. Doyle sometimes had a shortened name. When asked if she ever had a nickname, she answered, “No comment.”

After lunch, while waiting for Charlie’s dad to pick her up, the group went out into the garden to play badminton, Mrs. Doyle joining in so that there would be three players on each side.

While playing, Vini happened to notice how very friendly Sam was with Louetta, almost to the point of fawning over her, while practically ignoring everyone else. Even though he was on the team with Vini and Mrs. Doyle, he would frequently dash to the other side of the net to pick up the fallen birdie and present it to Louetta.

Maybe he feels he needs to help her because she's not as athletic as everyone else, Vini thought. Indeed, even Mrs. Doyle could trounce Louetta at badminton, and probably most other sports as well. Then Vini remembered Sam had been this way at lunch too, like practically fawning all over Louetta. In the end, it actually didn't matter that Sam was assisting the opposite side because Charlie was pretty much capable of trouncing everyone, which she did, winning both games for her team handily at 21-4, and 21-6.

In going inside with Charlie to retrieve the box of books, Vini noticed Sam laughing and acting a little goofy while sitting next to Louetta on a garden bench. *Funny, he never acted that way when he first met me,* she thought. *But she is very pretty,* Vini had to admit, *so it's probably just a normal reaction for a guy when meeting a pretty girl.*

Before Charlie left, the group planned to go swimming together the next morning at the spring-fed pool, all except Mrs. Doyle, who would simply be dropping Albert and Louetta off.

During the swimming excursion, Vini noticed that Sam again paid a lot of attention to Louetta, while completely ignoring Vini, and it somewhat hurt her feelings. Not that she had any designs on him or anything. She'd never thought of Sam as anything like a potential boyfriend. But she had thought they were pretty good friends. Though it bothered her a little, she decided not to let it spoil her fun, and simply thought, *Oh well, some people are wishy-washy with their friends.*

When picking up Albert and Louetta, Mrs. Doyle surprised everyone with two invitations for the upcoming week, one for the group to go to the waterpark on Monday, and the second for an outing to the aquarium on Tuesday. She had evidently already cleared this with both Vini's parents and Charlie's dad, but she hadn't been able to reach Sam's uncle on the phone. "Do you think he will let you go, Sam?"

"I don't see why not," Sam replied, pleased to be included. "I would have been gone from home for work anyway, so it's not like he would have had any plans that included me."

Mondays was one of the days Preston normally used his season pass at the waterpark, so he was going to be there too. Mr. Aberdeen generally dropped him off on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday

mornings; then a parent of one of Preston's friends usually drove him home in the afternoons.

One of Mrs. Doyle's friends from the dinner party, Mrs. Ellis, would be taking some of them in her car, since they all couldn't fit into one car. After dropping off the kids, she and Mrs. Doyle were planning a day of shopping and lunch at one of their favorite cafés before picking them up at three.

Mrs. Doyle had already bought the passes to the waterpark for all of them. Early Monday morning, she prepared three large insulated packs containing food and drinks to send with them. In dropping them off, she gave each of them some money for other drinks and snacks. They tried to object, especially since she had already done so much for them, but she insisted.

Though Preston was interested in meeting Vini's friends, he stayed mostly with his regular group of friends for the day.

Given what had happened during badminton and swimming, Vini was surprised that Sam ended up paying a lot of attention to her during their time at the park, while mostly ignoring Louetta. He seemed fairly indifferent to Charlie, who didn't particularly seem to care one way or another. Nor did she care all that much for the slides and other water attractions, deciding to read after going on one slide and having a brief float in a lagoon on an inner tube. She had brought a couple of Mrs. Doyle's cookbooks with her, in plastic bags so they wouldn't get wet, and ended up camping out under one of the big umbrellas in the picnic area for pretty much the rest of the day.

When picking up the crew in the afternoon, Mrs. Doyle was able to meet Preston; and she surprised Vini by inviting him to the upcoming aquarium outing.

In listening to Vini vent about her brother on occasion, Mrs. Doyle was reminded of several youngsters she had known over the years who seemed to have too much energy and not enough things to keep them busy. She had thought she might hire Vini's brother on occasion to help Sam with the gardening, mainly to help keep Preston occupied, active, and out of trouble. Plus, it was never bad to teach kids a thing or two about gardening. Mrs. Doyle also thought Sam might be a good role model for, and influence on, Preston. She wouldn't particularly be telling Vini her motives; instead, she would simply make out that Sam

needed help once in a while. But she needed to get to know this young man a little in order to start this process and make it all seem perfectly natural.

On Tuesday morning, Mrs. Doyle and Mrs. Ellis were again dual chauffeuring; and Mrs. Ellis specifically requested Charlie ride with her to the aquarium because she wanted to pick her brains about how she had managed to keep the cordon bleu for the dinner party so crispy. “The only time I ever made it, the breading turned out soggy.”

“Well, like a lot of people, I’ve started using those panko bread crumbs,” Charlie answered. “They tend to stay really crispy.”

By the time the group reached the aquarium, Mrs. Ellis had already hired Charlie to make some things for an upcoming bridge club party that she was hosting. It seemed catering might be a career Charlie was going to be able to start before even going to culinary school.

Mrs. Doyle gave everyone money for the entrance fees and lunch, though everyone tried to protest. Not only had Mrs. Doyle been overly generous with them already, they all had a little spending money—Louetta and Albert from their parents, Sam and Vini from working, Preston and Vini both from being given money by their mother prior to the outing. Charlie had been earning some money too this summer, even aside from helping with Mrs. Doyle’s dinner. Most weekday mornings, she was making breakfast tacos and assorted pastries for the workers at her dad’s construction site. She also had evidently done some tiling work for her dad, which she described to Vini as actually being a lot of fun, and good exercise.

After dropping the kids off at the aquarium and telling them they would return at three-thirty, Mrs. Ellis and Mrs. Doyle were off to play bunko and have a fancy luncheon with friends.

Three-thirty was fine, as the aquarium was also something of an amusement park with plenty to offer to equal a full day of fun, including various shows, carnival rides, and games of all sorts.

Access to everything except the games was included in the entrance fees. Since Vini knew that Preston absolutely loved both carnival and arcade games, she gave him a little extra money. He ended up winning a bright pink stuffed unicorn, which he gave to Vini. Other than playing games, Preston enjoyed hanging around with Albert and Sam, who didn’t seem to mind keeping him company. Sam ended up offering to

teach Preston some archery skills, as he often went to an indoor range located near his home. Albert, also slightly interested in archery, told Sam, "I think there's a target and some other equipment in the basement at the mansion. I thought about getting it out while we're here. You might see if it's something you and Preston can use." Vini had noticed the archery set while cleaning, but hadn't thought much about it until now. *What a good thing for Preston to get in to*, she thought, *a lot better than banging on things and yelling.*

Riding the Ferris wheel, Vini sensed and then caught a glimpse of Tulko, who was obviously keeping an eye on her.

Once again, Sam seemed to have pulled something of a reversal in attentiveness, in being friendlier today with Louetta, while practically ignoring Vini. Though she again thought it strange, Vini chalked up the switching back and forth to some boys being naturally fickle, along with Sam likely being uncomfortable around girls in the same way that Vini was sometimes uncomfortable around guys. So, especially when around two or more of them, he probably didn't quite know how to act, as far as being equally friendly. She also thought it likely that nervousness was a factor in his fawning all over Louetta, which was Vini's perception, anyway. In truth, Louetta was very pretty, which would probably make most boys nervous to the point of fawning. In equal truth, Vini was not particularly attracted to Sam, or not much, anyway. He was slightly handsome in an outdoorsy, woodsman, rugged sort of way. But if she really thought about it, Boyd was more her kind of guy, intellectual and bookish, and more of a sensitive soul. Except that Vini was also somewhat bookish and fairly sensitive; and she had read somewhere that people who were too much alike didn't make good couples, which is why opposites tended to attract. In thinking about this, Vini felt she probably just admired Boyd, more than actually liked him, as far as a potential boyfriend kind of like.

While having lunch, Albert noticed that the scar on Sam's leg looked odd, really red, like it was irritated in some way, or taking longer to heal than it should.

"Oh, I wiped out on my bike last night on the street in front of my house," Sam said, "so it's like a road rash. I guess it might be red for a while before it turns pink again."

After glancing at the scar, Vini happened to notice Charlie looking at Sam very intently and almost quizzically; but not at his scar, at his face, which Sam didn't notice because his head was turned slightly to the side of her position. After a few moments of studying Sam's face, as he glanced towards her, Charlie looked away quickly and turned her gaze down, as nonchalantly as possible, as if she didn't want him to see that she had been staring at him.

Just before time to meet Mrs. Doyle and Mrs. Ellis, they stopped in the House of Mirrors, and had great laughs in viewing everyone as shorter, taller, fatter, skinnier, and other forms of skewed. Vini was particularly fascinated in viewing herself in double in a particular trick mirror because, while she looked like she had a twin standing next to her, one of the twins was actually a little shorter, so it almost made her think there really was another actual person standing next to her, dressed like her, looking like her, but not her.

Imagining she had a twin made her think of Tami and Sami. While some identical twins liked to dress alike, probably to confuse others, Tami and Sami did not. Plus, Tami's hair was shorter than Sami's, so it had been easy at camp to tell them apart.

It was funny to have Tami and Sami on her mind because, just after leaving the House of Mirrors, she saw a set of twins walk by that reminded her of them. Charlie thought so too, and remarked as such.

On Wednesday, Mr. Corrigan stopped by the mansion in the afternoon to check on Sam's progress. Mr. Corrigan had worked mainly evenings and weekends during the early part of the summer; and since Sam had pretty much taken over, he had only been by a couple of times to assure himself that Sam was following his written instructions closely, which he was. In only having seen the former gardener a couple of times from the windows, at Mrs. Doyle's urging, Vini raced outside to meet him. Complimenting Sam on his work, Mr. Corrigan seemed to get a kick out of the yew-tree mushroom topiaries, of which Sam had completed four so far.

Having tea and cookies with everyone on the back porch, Mr. Corrigan described some of his recent travels to exotic places like India, Norway, and South Africa. Leaving about the same time Vini left for home, feeling satisfied that the gardens were in very good hands, Mr.

Corrigan felt very comfortable in heading home to plan his next foreign excursion, to Greece.

Albert and Louetta had been helping with the cleaning; and Mrs. Doyle was right, they weren't much good at it. But Vini did have to give them an "A" for effort, as their intentions and gusto were both certainly good, the results of which gave Vini more free time to spend with them, and Sam.

On Thursday morning in the garden, all four of them were kicking around a soccer ball. It had been difficult to draw Louetta away from painting kittens, but she was glad she had taken a break for the fresh air and exercise, which actually helped her creativity and energy.

In chasing after a particularly long wayward ball, Vini ended up very near the shadowy corner containing the privets. Sensing something strange, not necessarily spooky but definitely something out of the ordinary, she remembered the odd clock chimes corresponding to the numbers of yews and privets in that area of the garden. She hadn't yet investigated, as had been her intention.

Inching forward into the shadows, she couldn't see anything of significance, other than the fact that Sam hadn't done as much tidying up back here as in other places of the garden. Despite nothing appearing odd, Vini somehow felt drawn to step farther into the shadows, toward the stone bench, sitting somewhat forlornly under a crepe myrtle currently flowering in full fuchsia despite not getting much sun, the fuchsia actually looking more like a deep plum color for being in the shade.

In wondering what Vini was up to in taking so long to retrieve the soccer ball, the others shortly arrived in the shadowy corner and, oddly enough, seemed similarly drawn, almost like pins to a magnet, toward the bench.

This was no accident, but rather the design of Kugari, who knew all about the curiosity of teenagers and how they almost couldn't resist investigating most things, in particular, oddities like peculiar feelings felt in shadowy corners. Indeed, most demons, in learning about tempting and turning people to the side of evil, were given special training in luring.

This particular part of the garden that most people tended to avoid was, in fact, a doorway of sorts, into a realm where demons were prone

to hide and where they could do some of their best work, namely, kill those who followed the lure and found themselves inside. Actually “pocket” might be a better word than “doorway” to describe the phenomenon, since it wasn’t very large, just completely saturated with evil, along with a healthy dose of enticement and coaxing relating in subtle ways to various kinds of sins.

Kugari also knew how to plant thoughts, as this was something demons mastered very quickly early on in their training, thoughts that started as tiny seeds but that grew like hearty vines into something more. The thoughts weren’t simply words in people’s minds, but had something extra behind them, something indescribable, but largely irresistible, like a favored dessert placed in front of someone, complete with a large spoon and napkin, and with nothing at all to keep that person from going at it.

Shadows can’t hurt us, the thoughts began. Ignore that feeling in the gut. There is safety in numbers. Investigating the bad corner is actually good because it’s good to work out puzzles. No harm can come from stepping behind the bench, working through the jasmine tangle, and going behind the largest privet bush—which is exactly where the four friends found themselves less than two minutes after the planted thoughts started.

But, in fact, they weren’t behind a bush at all. Instead, they found themselves standing in the middle of a street in a business district of what appeared to be a small town. At least, given the looks of the storefronts running along either side of the street, it had a small-town feel because many of the two-story buildings looked just the sort that might have an apartment above the store, housing the baker who lived above his bakery, or the bookstore owner living above his bookshop.

While it was odd to find themselves no longer in the garden, but in a strange town, the town itself wouldn’t have been odd except that it appeared completely deserted, almost like a ghost town from the Wild West, except that it obviously wasn’t in the Wild West. Though with the air of desertion surrounding them, they might not have been surprised if a tumbleweed or two came bouncing by. Whether it was used or not, the street contained quite a few large potholes, so it was clear that this was a town in which things were not well kept up.

Looking around them, they couldn't see anything like a doorway back to the garden, or anything that might indicate which direction would lead to home; and it suddenly seemed to all of them that exploring the town would be a *good thing to do* while looking for a way back.

Despite finding themselves unexpectedly in a strange place, they didn't feel any nervousness, fear, or even a sense of urgency to leave, primarily because their brains were basically telling them that there was *no reason to feel nervous*, and *no reason to hurry back*.

Instead, they felt more curious about their surroundings. Even Louetta, who ordinarily would never go out exploring willingly on her own, was not feeling scared, and had a sense of wonder about the town. In fact, she even imagined she might find something to inspire her artistically—*lots of possibly good subject matter here*.

In walking down the street a short ways, they came to an old movie theater, obviously old because, high up on the building, the first two letters of the word, Theater, had fallen off of the sign. A faint reminder of the “T” and “h” remained because the area behind the letters was naturally a little darker, but basically the word left high on the building was, eater, not, Theater.

Suddenly feeling like it would be a *good idea to go inside*, they entered the unlocked front door next to the ticket booth.

Inside, it looked much like any other old theater, and even held a faint smell of popcorn. Since this was a single-screen cinema, there wasn't much question of where to go first to explore. Pushing open a swinging door, the group entered the one theater room, which wasn't all that large and whose rows of maroon seats were currently empty of patrons. Not having stadium seating, being the kind of older film house where people often had trouble seeing over the heads in front of them, the floor was slanted, rather than having stairs. The four explorers slowly made their way down the slant.

Sit down and wait for the show to start. It will start very soon.

Now paying attention to a strong and almost sharp feeling in her gut that was telling her very loudly that something was wrong, Vini resisted the powerful thought to *Sit!* that had just entered her head.

The others also resisted, as they too suddenly felt very uncomfortable and wary.

Though the urge to sit was almost irresistible (like the desire to shed shoes and feel soft sand beneath the toes on a warm summer beach) and their legs suddenly felt extremely tired and in need of a rest, which the soft cushions of the theater seats could probably provide, they all remained standing; until, that is, Albert suddenly found his legs would no longer support him and he basically collapsed into the nearest chair.

At this point, the reason for their uneasy feelings was exposed when the seat basically tried to eat Albert. Not only was he sucked downward into what seemed like bottomless cushions, the chair somehow became larger, as though, with only a small additional swallow, it might completely engulf him. Reacting quickly, Sam and Vini both grabbed Albert's arms and gave a mighty tug, which kept Albert from sinking farther down. Unfortunately, he stayed stuck, but only until Louetta joined in the pulling, basically grabbing her brother by the torso in a hug-like stance in order to yank him upwards, which then served to free him enough so that he could use his own muscle to help work himself loose from the vicious man-eating seat.

The theater no longer smelled like popcorn; instead, a horrible odor like rotting food mixed with sewer sludge permeated the entire room, obviously coming from the seats, which were now filled with decaying human arms and legs and other loose parts of people who had not been so lucky as to have escaped the deadly chairs. For some reason, the four latest potential victims hadn't been able to see this horror at first upon entering. But it was pretty clear now. And it was also clear that they needed to leave as quickly as possible.

Sprinting up the aisle and out the swinging doors, they exited the theater to find themselves once again standing in the middle of the street, breathless from the speed of their escape spurt.

"What sort of town is this?" Louetta cried, now very frightened.

Bent over with her hands on her knees trying to catch her breath, shaking her head, Vini didn't have an answer, as she couldn't even imagine one. They had started off in the garden, so how did they even end up here? And who could have an answer as to what here actually was? Oddly enough, Vini, though also scared, found herself slightly amused that Sam seemed to be more concerned about her than about Louetta. Standing in front of her, he was holding onto her upper arms

in an effort to support her in case she might be about to fall over, while scanning her face with concern.

“I’m okay,” she managed to say, which prompted Sam to again turn his full attentions to Louetta, in order to comfort her and assure her of his protection. Again, based on his turnaround, Vini was slightly amused.

Albert was mainly pale and silent. He had always known that his Aunt Frances’ house and garden were strange, even magical, based on Pizzo and a few other things, but he had never thought anything about the property might actually be dangerous.

But that’s exactly what the whole group knew now, for certain—that they were in danger, no mistaking it.

Since nothing had come chasing after them out of the theater, they were able to relax somewhat, though none of them had any good ideas as to how to find their way home and out of danger.

Making their way slowly down the street, they passed a small hardware store and a clothing boutique called Pam’s Fashions.

Next to the boutique was a paint store, but the lettering on the glass window that should have spelled Paint Shop had no space between the two words and an odd space between the “S” and the “h” so it actually read, PaintS hop.

As with the movie theater, it seemed a very good idea to enter, since it might well be *the way home*. And somehow they found they couldn’t resist entering because every one of them suddenly had the thought that this was *definitely where the exit to home can be found*.

Inside, they found nothing extraordinary or even odd, other than the fact that there were no doors leading to the back or upstairs of the building, at least none they could see, which seemed a little odd. With no obvious way home visible, or any exit other than the front door, they ended up looking at design books and paint samples, while waiting for some sort of inspiration as to what they should do next.

It didn’t take long for something to happen, but it certainly was not inspirational; in fact, it was downright scary, and just about as much so as the man-eating theater seats had been. Without even a whisper of a warning, about thirty heavy gallon paint cans suddenly jumped off of shelves and out of stacks and started shooting around the room in various directions, almost like cannonballs, except that they continually

changed directions, instead of hitting walls or the front windows, in order to keep sailing around because their targets, it seemed, were the people in the shop.

Like being forced to play an extremely wicked and deadly game of dodgeball, the four targets ducked, plunged, lunged, dipped, stooped, jumped, swerved, and as many other maneuvers as one might imagine to avoid being hit.

Vini did end up getting hit on one shoulder; but fortunately, it was a sideswipe.

To top all of the scariness off, the front door of the store had somehow disappeared! So there was no obvious method of escape.

Sam ended up being the one able to think the quickest. As one paint can was sailing by him, he managed to catch it with both hands; then, using his hands and arms like a slingshot, he swung swiftly around, slinging the can as hard as he could at the front windows, which immediately shattered upon contact.

Continuing to dodge as best they could, all four of them jumped out the now-open front windows. Landing on the sidewalk, they ran very fast down the road, only pausing to stop and look back when the noise and ruckus of paint cans crashing around in the store behind them abruptly halted.

Directly beside where the group had stopped was a game store whose sign featured playing cards. Speculating that the name of the store was probably supposed to be Ideal Games, they noted that an odd spacing of the letters actually spelled, I deal Games.

Again came a strong thought suggestion for them to enter, and again they found they couldn't resist. And, once more, in short order, they found themselves in grave danger when numerous stacks of playing cards suddenly started flying around the room with such force and precision that they might have been deadly weapons thrown by a knife thrower at a circus. Vini remembered seeing on television once a magician who actually could throw playing cards in such a way that they stuck into wooden posts exactly as though they were knives.

Only by using game boards as shields did they manage to find and exit the front door which, thankfully, hadn't disappeared.

Sam and Louetta both had cuts on their faces from flying cards, which they tended to outside the shop by applying pressure with tissues

that Louetta always carried with her in her pockets. Fortunately, the cuts were small enough so that the bleeding stopped fairly quickly.

A beauty shop sat next to the game store. This time, the friends took special note of the name on the sign above the door. The name of the shop should have been Hairport, but this word too had an unusual spacing, between the “H” and the “a”, which made it into H airport.

Imagining flying scissors and razors, and possibly chomping clippers and sizzling-hot curling irons sailing about and chasing after them, they were able to resist the urge to enter. Even though their brains were telling them this was likely *the way to get home*, their instincts to avoid danger and possible death were stronger, and managed to overrule the urge to step inside the shop.

Even with feeling like something invisible was tugging them toward the door, the group managed to stay outside, rooted to the sidewalk, which is when they noticed the horrible creature standing on a street corner, very near the theater, directly next to a lamppost whose light was on but was giving off dark light, if that was possible. It certainly wasn't like the light of any traditional light bulbs; instead, it looked cloudy and heavy, as if seeping out, instead of shining through, the glass.

Most people would never see a demon in their lifetimes, because the creatures most often worked in the shadows—concealed behind things, just around corners, and just out of sight—when using their deceptive mind practices and when arranging accidents, which is how they most often killed, as it was considered far too risky to commit murder in the ways most humans did, like stabbing or shooting or other evil acts of violence. Demons did occasionally employ these outright methods, but mainly only in scenarios in which the finger of guilt could clearly be pointed to another human being. This was actually how demons got some of their best conversions for hell—from people wrongly accused, convicted, and forced to serve sentences for these horrible crimes. It often didn't take long for people in these situations to despair, their hearts hardened, devoid of hope, and harboring hatred of the world and everything in it for being so unfair.

Never having seen a demon before, Vini couldn't even imagine what it was at first, until her mind told her most definitely, *demon from hell*.

Standing right at eight feet tall, Kugari would have been nearly ten feet wide if he were to have spread his wings, which were folded at present. He was a sickly and putrid color, appearing so in the shadowy lamplight at least, with knotty and sinewy muscles. Though his wings had ragged edges, they looked very strong, as though they might have been able to lug in flight something perhaps the size of an elephant if Kugari had chosen to take hold of one.

As terrified as Louetta was, basically frozen like a statue, Vini had to prod her into running with a pull; at which point, they all ran, as fast as they could down the street away from the demon, who had started running as well in pursuit of them.

Kugari wouldn't need to take to flight unless chasing over long distances because, with his legs being both stronger and longer than the human vermin, he was already closing the gap in the race down the street.

In a panic, and coming to the end of the street with no good ideas as to what they might do to either outdistance the demon or fight him, they were just passing a large pet store and veterinary clinic, called Pet Heaven, when Sam suddenly saw a flicker of light in the large front windows of the clinic that was golden and warm and reminded him of the sunniest part of Mrs. Doyle's garden. Yanking Louetta who was next to him by the arm, he swerved toward the light, while yelling to Vini and Albert to follow. Sam had stayed beside Louetta while running because he thought of her as slightly more frightened and helpless than the rest of them. He was right. She was keeping up, but was nearly petrified with fear, and was not able to think properly. If he hadn't yanked her arm, she would not have followed when he yelled as Albert and Vini had.

With all of them now seeing the golden light, which they were running headlong towards—because something in their brains and limbs was telling them strongly to do this—they somehow didn't collide with the windows of the clinic as they might have in an ordinary setting. Instead, they passed through the glass and into the garden, tripping over tangles of jasmine (as well as each other) to arrive at nearly the exact spot in the shadowy corner they had earlier been drawn to.

Except that the corner wasn't shadowy at the moment, it was blazingly and almost blindingly bright, so much so that they practically

stumbled over the stone bench in their haste to get out of the privet patch. Though the blinding light had subsided, while their eyes were adjusting back to normal, Sam ended up running into and bouncing off one of the yew trees. Albert, following closely behind him, then ran into and bounced off the back of Sam, with Louetta and Vini following suit, whereupon, they all ended up deposited on the ground from basically having taken each other out like a short line of dominoes. But sitting on the ground turned out to be a good thing because it gave them a chance to catch their breath and steady their shaky legs.

A few moments later, Vini was not at all surprised to see Tulko standing beside one of the yews. However, she was completely amazed to see materializing, and hovering beside him, a flaming bird, around the size of a large hawk, but completely engulfed in flames.

Albert and Louetta were completely speechless. Sam too from the appearance of Tulko; but not, it seemed, by the sight of the bird, which turned out to be a firebird, and one that was specifically attached to him as protector.

With everyone feeling more than a little stunned, they ended up staying seated in the soft grass for the time being, which was a perfect spot to be because this was all clearly going to take some time to sort out amongst them, with Vini needing to explain about Tulko, and wind horses in general, and Sam needing to explain about the firebird, whose name turned out to be Jelzey.

As it turns out, firebirds could change sizes, from about as large as a golden eagle to as small as the tiniest of embers. In regularly hanging around the garden, Jelzey most often kept herself tiny, so as not to be noticed. Today, in sensing Sam being in danger and zooming to his aid (all the way from a mountain in Argentina), Jelzey hadn't particularly wanted to be exposed; but Tulko's wind had involuntarily fired her up, in the same manner wind is able to fan a flame into a kind of fierceness. The fanning today turned out to be a good thing because Jelzey's brightness had acted as a beacon for Sam, showing him the route of escape from that awful place in which they had been trapped.

Tulko had been keeping his distance from the garden lately, so Vini could have some fun with her friends; plus, he had been busy at some cloud-skimming races and with a few projects, one of which was redirecting and breaking up a hurricane so that it would cause less

damage to a certain area. He, of course, had been under divine direction to do this; otherwise, he pretty much left nature alone, as he was supposed to. But he had suddenly sensed Vini's distress, which was not always obvious to him unless he was listening for her thoughts and feelings, but which he had been more tuned in to lately because he knew of Kugari's evil intentions towards his mistress.

In wondering what had happened to the kids, and in seeing the bright light, Mrs. Doyle had decided to investigate. Arriving at the line of yews, she didn't seem all that surprised by the scene, only taking a short pause before saying, "No wonder it's been so hot in the garden lately; how could it not be with a firebird hanging around."

Still somewhat dazed as they stood up, the four lucky escapees didn't quite know where to begin in explaining to Mrs. Doyle what had just happened, but they started by showing her the back corner. Protected by the presence of both Tulko and Jelzey—who was still hovering but who was now more the size of a small dove, and looking a lot less fierce, more something like a dove in both shape and demeanor—they felt comfortable investigating the shadowy corner where their nightmare had begun.

The corner had changed somewhat from its former state, but this was mainly due to the presence of Jelzey who had melted the soccer ball that was lying beside the stone bench. All of the blossoms on the crepe myrtle had withered, along with a few of the jasmine vines. There was also some scorching on the leaves of the privets and yews, but nothing the bushes couldn't rapidly grow out of. In a thorough search of the area, in particular behind the largest privet, they found no signs of a doorway into another realm, or anything else that might be proof of their ordeal. Nor was there any feeling of pull or lure, as there had been before. And the whole corner felt a good deal warmer, not just in temperature, but also in spirit, than it had at any other time during the summer.

They managed to get part of their story out to Mrs. Doyle, but it basically came out all jumbled up, especially the parts about man-eating seats, cannonball paint cans, and deadly-sharp flying playing cards.

"I have a snack ready on the back porch," Mrs. Doyle said calmly and firmly, interrupting a tearful Louetta who had started rambling on about running from a lamppost with huge wings.

Chapter Eleven

Demons and Doorways

In recognizing that most of her charges were still in a state of shock, Mrs. Doyle had decided to take matters in hand, to get the kids away from the scene and up to the house to talk things over in a more serene and controlled setting.

Tulko and Jelzey were gone by the time they retreated from the corner and began the trek, most of them on still-shaky legs, up to the house.

Trailing slightly behind the others, in thinking of Tulko and Jelzey together, Vini was reminded of the quote from Hebrews she had read recently. “Of the angels he says, ‘Who makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire.’” And she wondered if the “flames of fire” part could possibly pertain to the firebird. It would make sense for firebirds to be “servants” of God. From some of the things she had read about them, they always appeared to be on the side of good.

On the porch, and refueling with lemon cookies, cheese twists, and tall glasses of iced tea, they were able to calm down, at least enough to get their story out in more detail and in more of a straight line to Mrs. Doyle, who didn’t really seem all that surprised by their adventure.

“I’ve heard of Demon Pockets before,” she told them, “places that demons can lure others into, but places that don’t take up much space in our realm. Of course, it’s all still our realm, the place that Satan and his servants occupy. The earth is their territory, after all. But Demon Pockets are thought to mainly work only on the mind, so you probably never actually left the spot behind the privet. It might have only been your minds that were somewhere else.”

“But my shoulder is really sore,” Vini protested, “and Sam and Louetta definitely have real cuts.”

“You can still get hurt, even if things are primarily happening in your mind,” Mrs. Doyle explained. “That’s the way that kind of magic works, evil magic, that is.”

“It was like something out of a comic book,” Albert stated, “but not cartoony.”

“I guess it’s possible that it was an actual doorway to some actual odd town,” Mrs. Doyle speculated thoughtfully.

“That’s exactly what I would have thought to call it, Odd Town,” Sam said.

“I’d call it Scary Town,” Louetta interjected, in a trembling voice, because she was still very shaken up by the nightmare. “That demon was so scary and so real. I always thought demons would be ghostly, not so bulky and real and heavy looking.”

“He probably wasn’t actually heavy,” Albert stated, “because he moved so fast, fast like a cheetah.”

“You are correct; demons are not likely to be heavy,” Mrs. Doyle affirmed.

“Because it’s all in our minds,” Sam said, “like an illusion.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Mrs. Doyle responded. “Even if it was all in your minds—very likely because Satan is a master of mental trickery, as are many of his servants who are able to plant thoughts so real that people can actually see, feel, hear, taste, smell—what these creatures are made out of won’t make them heavy like we understand the word to mean, weighted and with substance.” Pausing to have a sip of tea, she continued a moment later. “Demons are not made of much substance because, although Satan and his followers are supernatural, and probably in command of various kinds of magic, they cannot create things in the way that God can, out of nothing, or out of goodness and purity, or out of His will, or however His limitlessness manifests itself in bringing things into being and breathing life into them. Satan can only use what’s available to him. As far as what he uses to fashion evil servants, it’s all speculation; but there’s no shortage of cesspools, dung from foul creatures, rotted things, sharp things, painful things. Also in abundance are bitterness, greed, bad intentions, hatred, pride, evil thoughts, guilt, self-loathing, pleasure in having power over others, or any number of other sins, and possibly also things like the energy from bad or unhappy memories. But when fashioned into actual creatures like demons to do his bidding, these things don’t make up true flesh and blood, muscles and bones, like what we are made of.” Stopping for another sip of tea, she then added, “I imagine Satan to be something like

Dr. Frankenstein; but instead of body parts, his creations are composed of evil energy wrapped up in other nasty stuff he manages to get his hands on, then probably baked up using something like hellfire. And I imagine some of his monsters have spawned other foul creatures, of varying degrees of evil, like maybe hobgoblins, hellhounds, fire slugs, warcsies, and gremlins.”

“What’s a fire slug?” Vini said, at the very moment Albert asked, “What’s a warcsie?”

Looking a little taken aback, as though she had just let some big secret slip, Mrs. Doyle didn’t answer right away. But a moment later, rising to take the snack tray back inside, she said as nonchalantly as possible, in almost a mumbling fashion, “Oh you know, they’re kind of like kammenkurfs, but the slug is smaller, of course, more like the size of a filtz.” With this, she whisked the tray from the table and quickly disappeared into the house, giving them no opportunity to ask further questions.

After thinking for a few moments, Louetta asked, “Was she speaking in tongues maybe, or does she just know a lot more about magical stuff than we do?”

“Maybe both,” Vini answered, since neither suggestion, if true, would have particularly surprised her. Mrs. Doyle’s words had certainly had a ring of truth to them, so Vini felt it was more than possible for things like fire slugs and kammenkurfs to exist. Perhaps Mrs. Doyle just didn’t want to talk about them for some reason.

However, while wiping down the kitchen counters a short while later, she overheard Mrs. Doyle on the back porch telling Sam, “Oh yes, vetches definitely exist, both hairy and bald. Crotons too, both short haired and wooly.”

“You’re pulling my leg,” Sam said, with laughter in his voice.

“Absolutely not,” Mrs. Doyle firmly answered.

“But those are the names of weeds, not magical creatures,” he protested, “hairy vetch and wooly croton.”

“Exactly,” Mrs. Doyle said, in a very serious tone. “Nasty things, just like weeds, springing up where you least expect them.”

Perhaps Mrs. Doyle was making some things up, like a few names of magical creatures. However, with her ability to discern, Vini was pretty sure that most of what she had told them was true.

In the library just before going home, Vini thought more about what Mrs. Doyle had said, and it reminded her of some of the things she had discovered in her research, things that she believed were correct. Looking over a few of her notes, she reviewed a paragraph she had written pertaining to Satan and demons.

“From the time Satan fell and was thrown down to earth, this has been his territory, along with other fallen angels that he rallied to his cause. So we are basically living in enemy territory. But we have God as our Protector and Father. And He does not often allow Satan to directly harm His children. But Satan has created other nasty spirits like demons who, although they are not traditional flesh-and-blood creatures, can harm human beings. Satan and the nasty spirits working for him, including demons, are free to roam the earth, using who knows what kinds of magic to further their evil. They are thought to be able to create magical doorways, which lead people into dark places, so they can be tempted, tortured, and possibly even killed. These might be real doorways that resemble real things like rabbit holes in gardens, manholes in dark alleys, or trap doors in floors. But they might also be simply doorways in our minds. Given that Satan and his followers are masters of deception, they might be able to work on the brain to such a degree that people stumble into these doorways in their own minds. Much of the brain is unused. What if evil influences could go to work on the brain in such a way as to hide these doorways in unused parts?”

To this paragraph, Vini added the words, Demon Pockets, so that she could look up more information about this later.

In thinking more carefully about their experience in Odd Town, Vini found herself wondering why the most dangerous places in that town had been a movie theater, a paint store, a game shop, and presumably a beauty shop. Could it be that these things could lead to sin in human lives? Entertainment could become sin in using some bad forms of it for enjoyment, things not pleasing to God, like how people tend to idolize entertainers, or come up with vulgar forms of entertainment. Focusing too much on beauty could be sinful, possibly related to vanity and pride, or even self-centeredness. Home decoration, similarly, if people were fixated on it too much, could also be bad.

Even in looking through the design books in the paint shop, Vini had found herself admiring the beautiful rooms full of fine furniture, and almost wishing she could have a whole new bedroom set and a freshly-painted room—things she didn't actually need because she already was very comfortable, with her current bed, desk, and dresser being fully functional. Games could lead to problems too such as laziness and addiction, or people just being focused on the wrong things, leading to distraction or neglect of more important things.

The trip to Odd Town had been almost like having a bad dream, but one that actually meant something, as a warning. *If we're not careful, these things can be our downfall. And it would make sense for demons to use what's familiar to us to tempt us. My goodness, Vini further thought, demons are more in our world than people might think. Well, they're definitely here, just hidden, but not so hidden that we can't easily find them, or they find us.*

Aside from the scariness of the experience, there was something else troubling Vini, something she didn't particularly want to remember, but that, unfortunately, she couldn't forget. Somehow, by a thought laid onto her brain, she had known that the monster's name was Kugari, and that he was a demon working for Satan, and that he was specifically after her, even though he wouldn't have minded killing a few others too along the way. And whether or not the experience had all been in their minds, Vini knew for certain that if she had died in Odd Town, she would have died for real. For some reason, she didn't want to share this information with the others. Though she couldn't have explained why she felt the need to keep it to herself, she thought it was possibly because, in not acknowledging this openly, she hoped to lessen the danger, to all of them.

She also found herself thinking about the message of the clock chimes. She had assumed it was a message to investigate the corner with the privets. But now, in considering the horror they had been lured into, she wondered if the message might have been a warning, to stay away from that part of the garden. However, another possibility also occurred to her—that the message might not have been from God at all, but was instead part of the lure the demon had used. Since Satan and his demons were expert deceivers, she certainly thought it was possible

that the clock chimes were meant to get her thinking, and looking for something corresponding to the numbers of chimes.

Feeling shaken and vulnerable, Vini wondered, *Is this related to looking for a unicorn?*

Somehow her mind was answering her, very assuredly, *Yes.*

And this was probably part of the reason why God had given her Tulko, to help protect her from the demon.

As Vini was leaving the mansion, she overheard Sam talking to Mrs. Doyle. "I'll have to be back by those privets sometimes for work. I can't always avoid that corner."

"Later this afternoon, we'll hang a cross somewhere near the bench," Mrs. Doyle answered. "That should help."

Sam and Mrs. Doyle did hang a lovely stone cross on the trunk of the crepe myrtle, whose withered flowers had already fallen off. Remarkably, the tree was already starting to put on a few new blooms in a noticeably brighter shade of fuchsia than the ones that had fallen. In a mere three days, it would be completely covered with blossoms, and would serve to act as a lure for many bees and butterflies that had previously avoided the corner.

Vini was pensive the next morning at work, still feeling a little vulnerable, and maybe like she was ready to take a break from reading about and looking for unicorns. She had to admit she was more than a little afraid. If her efforts so far had resulted in a demon under Satan's command specifically hunting her, who knows what else might happen. And she wasn't just afraid for herself, of course, she was afraid for her friends too.

After cleaning a bathroom, she set to work sweeping the many mansion balconies. From outside a bedroom on the third floor, she noticed Sam talking to Louetta in the garden. *No wonder Sam likes her better*, Vini thought, in rather a disagreeable manner. *She's prettier, and talented. What am I talented at?*

Not much, her mind answered.

Unable to recognize that her mind was currently steeped in ugly thoughts because of evil influences (which is how Satan and his followers often did their best work, by planting ugly thoughts on the brain), Vini found it hard to shake feelings of jealousy stemming from the deeply-rooted insecurities that many teenagers have. Nor could she

keep from feeling slightly angry when thinking about how changeable Sam had been towards her lately.

However, she found that keeping busy helped to make her feel better, so she kept sweeping, with gusto.

A little while later, as she was dusting a large painting on the second floor, Vini caught her breath when the painting suddenly swung on its hanger to one side, revealing an unusual door behind it, set into the wall. Since she loved reading books about old houses with things like secret tunnels and hidden staircases, Vini got very excited in thinking she might have discovered a secret passage.

Mrs. Doyle was just coming down the hall.

“Look, a secret passage!” Vini said.

Mrs. Doyle laughed as she said, “Otherwise known as the laundry chute. It’s covered up because I never use it. I never did, even when Mr. Doyle was alive. Since it was just the two of us, I always just used the hamper and then carried baskets of laundry down to the basement, same as I do now.”

“But, this door is so big,” Vini said, unable to imagine a laundry chute being this large, at least three feet wide and nearly four feet tall.

“Well, it’s a big house,” Mrs. Doyle responded. “If it had ever been full of people, there might very well have been big amounts of laundry; hence, the design of a large chute.”

Heading down the stairs, with laughter still in her voice, Mrs. Doyle said, “Secret passages...secret doors in the basement...what will these kids think of next....”

“I never said anything about a secret door in the basement,” Vini called down to her.

Halting on the stairs, and sounding slightly nervous for some reason, Mrs. Doyle answered, somewhat slowly, “Well...that’s where the chute comes out...that’s what I meant. And...you were in the basement earlier...so I thought you might have been talking about that.”

Mrs. Doyle was then off to read in the parlor, carrying a throw with her because the room had again felt chilly to her earlier in the day.

In getting back to dusting, the more Vini thought about Mrs. Doyle’s parting words, she had a funny feeling that Mrs. Doyle was hiding something, especially because her words didn’t quite ring true, in particular, the part about how she thought Vini had been talking about

the basement. Was there some sort of secret door in the basement? *I'll have a good look around the next time I'm down there*, she thought.

Of course, Mrs. Doyle was allowed to have secrets, especially about her own house; so after considering for a while, Vini felt a little guilty about the idea of snooping around, and she talked herself out of doing so.

Charlie came to Vini's house on Saturday morning so the girls could go swimming together. This gave Vini a good opportunity to tell Charlie what had happened in the garden.

"I wonder if Lyydu could have helped in some way," Charlie speculated. "He's so powerful."

"Tulko is too, and the firebird," Vini responded. "Sam said it was Jelzey that showed him the way out. Her brightness acted like a beacon for him. But she evidently couldn't keep us from getting lured in, so I'm guessing Tulko probably couldn't either. I mean, human beings have free will. We can either give in to temptations, or fight them. Plus, our helpers can't watch over us twenty-four hours a day. I think we just have to be on our guard all the time, especially when we're on our own."

"Lyydu is still a mystery to me." Charlie said, somewhat thoughtfully. "I know he's around, but we haven't done much together lately, so I'm still not sure of what I'm supposed to do, or exactly what he's going to help me to do. I mean, I don't feel led to find a unicorn, or anything like that. So my plan is still just to try to be a better person. But why would God give me a helper like a thunderbird for something like that? There must be something more I'm supposed to do."

"Probably wait until you get clear direction from God," Vini advised. "I'm waiting too. I've gotten messages about going to Italy, for some reason, related to looking for the unicorn, I'm sure. But I think I'm supposed to wait until I get more details. I don't want to rush God's timing."

Both girls were excited about the upcoming Monday because they had been invited to a party and sleepover at the mansion to celebrate Louetta's fifteenth birthday. When talking about this, Vini confided in Charlie some of her recent thoughts concerning Sam and Louetta. "I thought Sam kind of liked me," she said, "but here he is always flirting with Louetta. I wouldn't necessarily think of him as a boyfriend, but I

thought we were pretty good friends. He was like this a little before Albert and Louetta came, but the switching on-and-off friendly is way more noticeable now. It's like I turn invisible to him sometimes, particularly when he's hanging all over Louetta."

Rather stoically, Charlie asked, "Do you want me to beat her up for you?"

"Of course not!" Vini exclaimed, aghast, basically unable to believe Charlie had said this.

"I was just joking!" Charlie said, rather emphatically. "I'm not going to beat anyone up, I promise."

Since Vini was quiet for a time after this, Charlie added, "I am so sorry about third grade. I still feel really guilty about that."

"Don't feel guilty," Vini quickly said, as she could tell Charlie was truly in anguish over this. "God forgives our sins, so there's no reason to feel guilty about it. One of the main reasons Jesus came to earth was to die for our sins so that we might be forgiven every trespass, if we are truly sorry. Now that He's ascended to heaven, He sits at the right hand of God and intercedes for us, kind of like a go-between, or a lawyer, acting on our behalf."

"I didn't know that," Charlie said. "See, I need people to explain these things to me because I'm not reading the right things in just picking and choosing verses from the bible. And it's easier to understand when someone explains it." After a pause, she added, "But aren't Jesus and God the same Person?"

"Yes," Vini answered, "One, but in three parts, like three different personas, and with three different jobs. God was, is, and always will be. But He came to earth as a man in the form of His Son to experience life with us, then die for us as a sacrifice to make up for how Adam and Eve messed up when they sinned in the Garden of Eden. Now, the breach is healed and we can be forgiven and taken back into His family. So, after Jesus died and was resurrected, He then went back to heaven to sit with His Father and act on our behalf. The third persona, the Holy Spirit, is that part of God that lives inside believers, to act as our Helper and internal Guide, and to make us feel comforted and close to Him. And the Holy Spirit is how He speaks to us sometimes. Working through people, the Holy Spirit wrote the bible. It's complicated, I know," Vini

added, “but it basically boils down to the fact that He is One, but also Three.”

“I think it’s both complicated and simple,” Charlie said.

“Exactly,” Vini replied, surprised that her friend had gotten that from what Vini had told her.

“I understand better now,” Charlie said, smiling. “You’re a good explainer.”

“Not really,” Vini protested. “In fact, I was going to suggest that you do some reading on the subject of the Trinity, because there are experts, people who can explain it a lot better than I did, and in a lot more depth.”

“So God coming to earth in the form of Jesus was maybe like a way to connect with us on a level we can understand,” Charlie said, “to share something of Himself with us. Otherwise, He’s on such a higher level, we might never feel close to Him like He wants us to feel.”

“I think you’re exactly right,” Vini said.

With Charlie slowly nodding, Vini added, “I’m sorry you got in so much trouble with your dad over the third-grade thing.”

“I’m not,” Charlie said. “He needed to set me straight. By the way, Dana is in one of those juvenile facilities, right now, as we speak. She’s been drinking and doing drugs for at least a couple of years; but I think she called in a bomb threat to school, so she and her friends could get out of school. So, of course she got arrested, because that’s an incredibly serious crime. I wouldn’t be surprised if she ends up in an actual prison someday.”

“Gosh,” Vini said, “I didn’t know it was that bad. I mean, when your dad mentioned her, he didn’t let on that she was in that kind of trouble.”

“Well, he probably doesn’t want to admit it,” Charlie replied. “But he won’t let them come and stay with us. When his brother asked last year, my dad made an excuse about our bathrooms being remodeled so we weren’t able to have guests. I’m glad they didn’t come to stay because Dana is such a bully. I really think I only bullied other people because I felt so helpless when she bullied me. It’s like I became a bully because I wanted to feel more in control and powerful.”

Even though she had once been the object of Charlie’s bullying, Vini felt she could actually understand.

“I wonder if Dana got pulled into one of those Demon Pockets that Mrs. Doyle mentioned,” Vini speculated, “and that’s why she’s turned out like she has.”

“My dad thinks she’s going to end up in a string of rehab centers,” Charlie went on. “And he doesn’t think those kinds of places can really do anything for someone like her. She’s so manipulative and sour minded, and mean spirited. I’m so glad I started praying and reading the bible, and I’m so glad I have you for a friend.”

“I’m glad too,” Vini said.

At home later, Vini realized that it was probably Satan or one of his minions that was causing her to have somewhat ugly thoughts about Louetta. It wasn’t Louetta’s fault if boys liked her. She was certainly a nice person, added to her beauty and talent. People would be pretty stupid, or mean, not to like her.

With a huge sigh, Vini reminded herself, *That’s what Satan does. He makes us think badly of each other, and be critical of one another. And he wants us to compare ourselves to others so that we will be jealous and think less of ourselves for not being as good or pretty or whatever. Or, he wants us to think ourselves superior to others, which is even worse because that’s where a lot of meanness and cruelty come from.* Vini suddenly felt like she should apologize to Louetta.

No, just apologize to God and ask forgiveness, she told herself strongly. Vini absolutely would not be telling Louetta that she had had ugly feelings about her, because that might make Louetta feel bad. Although she had vented to Charlie, Vini felt sure Charlie was someone she could trust to keep the secret.

Chapter Twelve

Louetta's Birthday

On Monday morning, Vini carried her overnight bag with her to work, so that she wouldn't have to return home before the sleepover. The party was scheduled for noon, but Louetta had invited the girls for the whole afternoon because Mrs. Doyle wanted the celebration to be a lengthy affair.

Louetta had absolutely told everyone, "No gifts! Just bring yourselves." However, Vini had bought her a gift card for a chain hobby store so that she could buy art supplies, after making sure one of the stores was conveniently located near Louetta's home. Vini had been planning to include Charlie's name as joint giver on the card, even before Charlie offered to pitch in for the gift.

Sam was being friendly to Vini again. (She had just about decided that he was probably one of the most fickle people in the world.) But what seemed odder than Sam's changeability this morning was the fact that the cut on his face was bleeding again, as though it had just happened. When Vini mentioned that it seemed the cut was taking a long time to heal, he told her, "Oh, I've been picking at it. I know I shouldn't."

The moment he said this, the suspicion alarm in Vini's brain suddenly activated because his words didn't ring true. He was lying; she was sure of it. She had always been able to tell when people weren't telling the truth. But why lie about something silly like this? It didn't make sense. After considering for a while, she decided that Sam must just be the kind of person who likes to keep some things to himself, such as the fact that his bruises and scrapes take a long time to heal properly.

Maybe he just likes to put on an air of mysteriousness, Vini thought. *But he's coming off as secretive.* Having friends was great, but she definitely wanted to keep Sam at something of an arm's length because she wasn't sure she could entirely trust him. Vini had also gotten the

idea that Mrs. Doyle was being secretive about something in the basement. But there was a difference between being furtive and actually lying. Vini was definitely getting some weird vibes from Sam lately, not that he was necessarily bad, just weird, and like he had something to hide.

In having decided to keep some slight distance from Sam, taking a break in the morning on the back porch with Sam and Mrs. Doyle, Vini didn't join in the conversation much, which was mainly about rainwater collection systems. Mrs. Doyle had been looking into this, but the roof of the mansion was evidently not the right kind for this type of installation. "The gutter system would have to be entirely redone," she said. "Plus, it's just not a good roof design for it, with all of the turrets."

Having the right kind of roof, Sam's church had recently gotten one of these collection systems to gather rainwater for their large community garden on the church property. The rainwater tanks were evidently buried, so they wouldn't be unsightly.

"The system would be great to have if you ever decide to build a large greenhouse," Sam said. This was something they had briefly discussed one other time because Mrs. Doyle was considering growing fresh food year round to donate to local food banks and other charities. The roof of the greenhouse would evidently be good for collecting rainwater.

Mrs. Doyle pretty much did everything for Louetta's party, as far as the food and decorations, and had everything ready in the music room, where everyone was gathering, by the time Charlie arrived just before noon.

Charlie had decided it was okay for everyone at the mansion to know that she had a thunderbird as a friend. In briefly discussing that she, Vini, Sam, and Louetta all had magical creatures sort of attached to them, Charlie wondered if Albert might have one too.

"No thank you!" he emphatically answered when she asked. Though it might have been useful to have a wind horse handy, he would not have wanted to have a creature like Pizzo attached to him.

They wondered too if Mrs. Doyle maybe had a magical creature as a friend.

“Oh, doubtful,” Mrs. Doyle responded with a laugh. “None would likely want to put up with me.”

“I bet you secretly have a connection to one that you maybe don’t want to tell us about,” Charlie speculated, somewhat mischievously, “and I bet it’s a gryphon.”

Mrs. Doyle smiled at this, but didn’t reply.

However, this suddenly made Vini think of what Mrs. Doyle had said about the shed. “I looked around in the shed after you mentioned something living out there,” she told her employer, “but I never saw anything. The shed feels a little eerie, but there’s nothing in there.”

“Oh, it’s in there alright,” Mrs. Doyle said, in something of a disgusted tone, “probably hiding in the rafters, or inside that old water heater. I was fooled a couple of times too, but it’s out there. He’s just got you fooled, unless it’s a she, hard to tell. I was thinking of making a planter out of it, the water heater that is. I’ll need to check with someone who does cutting and welding to see if it’s possible.” Murmuring something about looking up the number of one of Mr. Corrigan’s neighbors, a retired welder, with her words trailing off, Mrs. Doyle left the music room to retrieve another platter of food from the kitchen without elaborating more on whatever might be living in the shed.

The theme of the party was a Fancy Tea Party, and the fabulous food included a large assortment of delicate sandwiches, dilled cucumber salad, cream cheese puff pastries, various filled cookies, homemade toffee, scrumptious éclairs, and an enormous angel food cake covered with whipped cream and topped with strawberries.

Mrs. Doyle had gotten Louetta exactly the same thing as Vini and Charlie had, a hobby-store gift card, along with several huge canvasses. As a joint gift, Albert and Sam had bought an assortment of artist paint brushes for her.

Piszo did something for the party which delighted and surprised everyone. Vini didn’t know why she should be surprised, with everything magical going on lately, more that it was a surprise that the disagreeable little creature could do something so completely wonderful. He had evidently used some kind of magic specific to puck trolls to bring several characters from Louetta’s paintings to life, so that they could attend the party too. The four-foot twin giraffes sat politely

on poufs the whole time, while the bowling-ball-size snail hung out beside the punch bowl on the tea table. The three-foot monkey scampered around a great deal blowing bubbles the whole time with his purple bubble wand. Remarkably, for all of his scampering, nothing in the music room ended up broken.

Piszo also brought to life several china figurines from some of Mrs. Doyle's collections, along with one of Louetta's stuffed animals—a tiny multicolored striped elephant, that startled everyone several times with the loud trumpet sound of his trunk. What was perhaps more startling, at least at first, was the sight of all of them trooping down the hall to attend the party, the china shepherdess prodding the elephant with her staff to get him to move along. (It seemed he was initially more interested in exploring and meandering than in coming to a party.) Several illustrations from some of Louetta's favorite childhood books also attended the party. These were small, of course, since puck-troll magic never changed the sizes of anything, and included Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox, Mother Goose, a grey fox, Pooh Bear and Eeyore, and a dachshund named Peanut who evidently liked to chase the monkey-blown bubbles. Thankfully, he didn't break anything in the music room either, for all of his scampering around. But he was rather small, about the size of a mouse, so he probably wouldn't have been able to accomplish much destruction.

Piszo had his own tiny tea set for the party, and a small-sized Victorian chair, borrowed from Mrs. Doyle's collection of miniatures housed in a glass cabinet in one of the hallways on the third floor. He was set up comfortably on a lamp table, next to a crystal bowl full of butter mints. Between casting adoring gazes at Louetta, he shot scathing scowls at everyone else. After about twenty minutes, finally unable to be nice any longer, he started throwing butter mints at the party goers, excepting Louetta, of course. The recipients of these little gifts simply collected the mints on their tea plates, to save for eating later.

As the party was winding down, Charlie told everyone, "Lyydu is outside in the garden, if anyone would like to meet him."

Vini had been able to feel the thunderbird's presence as well and eagerly went out with the others to see him. Mrs. Doyle was the bravest and first to approach and touch the magnificent bird. In more sunlight

than he had been in when Vini first saw him, Lyydu's feathers were even more colorful and striking. Louetta chose not to touch Lyydu, or even approach very closely, though she did admire him from a distance and thought she might like to paint a thunderbird someday.

At one point, while Albert and Sam were stroking Lyydu's neck, Vini noticed Charlie again looking at Sam quizzically. Imagining that this was because of what she had told Charlie earlier, about how Sam had been so changeable lately around her and Louetta, Vini didn't dwell long on the matter, also forgetting to ask Charlie about it later.

Upon reentering the house, the group discovered that all of the artistic characters brought to life by Pizso had gone back to their original states and were all back in their normal places. And the little puck troll was currently nowhere to be found.

In helping to clean up after the party, and in gazing at the giraffe, snail, and monkey paintings, Vini once again felt a tinge of jealousy over Louetta's talent. Brushing the thoughts away quickly, she told herself, *This is Satan causing me to have ugly feelings. And it's disgusting and wrong.*

With Albert and Mrs. Doyle out running a few errands in town, Sam sculpting another yew mushroom, and Louetta deciding to paint for the rest of the afternoon, Vini and Charlie took a tour of the entire mansion before deciding to hang out in the library for a while.

After reading for a couple of hours, they headed outside to play a couple of games of badminton.

Mrs. Doyle made everyone salad and hamburgers for dinner. By that time, Sam was already gone for the day. No boys were invited for the sleepover, of course, other than having Albert in the house; and the girls wouldn't be seeing much of him because his plans were to call his girlfriend after dinner, then settle in to read for the rest of the evening.

Hanging out in Louetta's bedroom after dinner, the girls talked some about school. Basically, because of the way her birthday fell, Louetta had already started high school; but it hadn't been any big deal when she transitioned from eighth to ninth grade because she and her brother went to a private church school that had grades K-12 all attending in the same set of buildings. But she did understand Vini's and Charlie's apprehension about stepping up to high school, and she tried to put them more at ease in telling them a few things about ninth-

grade classes and other whatnots that might be different from what they had been used to in middle school.

Charlie was planning to try out for volleyball, and Vini had been thinking about getting into water polo, because swimming was turning out to be something she was very good at, and because the idea of a team sport sounded appealing, as opposed to competing in individual swimming events.

Louetta smiled as she told them, “You’ll think me pretty wimpy for being on the Chess Team at my school, and not into any physical sports at all.”

Charlie was very interested in chess, but had never played, so Louetta offered to teach her. Vini lost interest watching about halfway through their first game, so she decided to read for a bit. Two rollaway beds had been set up in the spacious bedroom for the sleepover, and Vini chose one to stretch out on while reading.

Later, when the girls decided to have a pillow fight, Albert knocked on the door to ask them to keep it down. “I’m trying to read, so I don’t want to hear a lot of squealing or cackling.”

As he was heading back to his room, and as the girls were having a fit of giggles, he called back to them, “Or giggling, either!”

After painting their nails, the girls headed downstairs for a while. Mrs. Doyle had already retired for the night.

Charlie ended up in the kitchen, making a snack for them, which would turn out to be nachos with leftover éclairs from the party on the side.

While waiting for the snack, Vini sought out Louetta who had gone to the music room to rearrange a few things. In peeking into the room, and in noticing that Pizzo was not around, Vini entered and casually admired the paintings, particularly the fluffy tabby kitten Louetta was currently working on that was absolutely huge, for a kitten.

Louetta had just pulled a painting out of a stack in the corner that particularly caught Vini’s eye, more like mesmerized her, because the subject was something totally unrecognizable, but incredibly beautiful.

In staring intently at the painting, Vini couldn’t imagine what it was—an abstract garden, a colorful nebula, some part of a rainforest no one has ever seen and the flowers unlike any ever seen, some kind of incredibly amazing dessert swirled up with the most delicious candies?

She knew the food thing likely wasn't right (she was probably just looking forward to the snack) because she could see two figures in the painting, human figures; but they were glowing, and Vini imagined their movements to be almost like floating or flying.

The feelings the painting conveyed were pretty much indescribable, but it was almost as though Vini's eyes were not necessarily seeing it, but her heart was. And her heart almost hurt, but in a good way, like an ache that was being soothed in some sort of divine manner, like God Himself touching her heart. This was the way she felt sometimes when reading the bible.

Vini had always imagined Louetta to be an amateur artist. Though obviously good at painting, her subjects were usually simple and familiar. But Vini had obviously been deceived by things like kittens and giraffes. While her work was often unique, like the giraffes wearing bowties and reading novels, or the monkey in the hammock blowing bubbles, Vini never thought Louetta had a masterpiece in her. Though not an art expert, Vini felt this particular work probably was a masterpiece, because just looking at it made her feel so deeply.

In noticing Vini's interest, Louetta explained, "This is what I imagine another world created by God to look like, one in which Adam and Eve didn't mess up and rebel. How simply amazing a world like that might be. I tried to imagine the most beautiful parts of our world being even more beautiful, wonders like the wildlife and the vastness of the seas, and then I tried to paint it. So this is what I came up with, and I hope our eternal home might be similar. I had a dream once that was sort of related to this," she went on, thoughtfully. "I saw a world with trees taller than skyscrapers, fruit the size of cows, and houses that were all fairylike and almost floating. The land was beautiful, and the people were too. They were caring, artistic, intelligent, and had all kinds of other good qualities too. Nobody was hungry or sick or lonely. It was pretty much a perfect place, or at least as perfect as I could imagine."

After hearing the explanation, Vini actually cried. The idea of a world like this was so beautiful, and she could see all of this in Louetta's painting.

No wonder Pizzo was so enthralled. He probably saw this sort of thing in all of Louetta's work. *But my brain is so simple*, Vini thought, *I was only seeing the simplicity, not the depth or complexities of what*

she does. She's not just an artist, but a divinely-inspired artist, and a dreamer.

Seeing Vini so moved, Louetta told her, "I'll make sure this is given to you in the future. I want to keep it for a while, because it matches my bedroom colors at home. But I will make sure you get it later. I promise not to paint over it."

"Paint over it!" Vini cried, unable to imagine anyone doing this. "How could anyone think of painting over something like this?"

"Artists often paint over their creations," Louetta explained. "We can't keep everything, especially not the practice work. Canvasses are expensive. Paints too, that's why I use acrylics. They're much cheaper than oils, especially for as big as I like to paint. But I like oils better. Maybe, someday, I'll be exclusively an oil artist, if I can afford it."

Louetta also confided in Vini that she wanted to get into doing trompe l'oeil art. "It's so real that it tricks the eye," she said. "Like a window painted on the wall; at first glance, you think it's a real window, especially because you see a tree branch outside it that looks real. Or a fireplace that, at a glance, looks real; but when you get closer, you realized it's just painted on. That's what I think I'd most like to do in the future. And I wouldn't even need canvasses for that type of painting because they're most often done just on walls."

Vini had a totally different opinion of Louetta after this, particularly when she realized that Louetta's beauty was not just on the outside. In fact, she likely wasn't much prettier than any other girls, as Vini at first had thought, but it was her inner beauty and artistry shining through from the inside to the out. People pretty on the inside often appeared that way on the outside as well.

On Tuesday morning, Charlie's dad picked her up early. Vini, being already at work, was able to start early, and get quite a bit done before breakfast even.

Later in the day, as she was taking a break in the library, she read a little something on thunderbirds, which described how incredibly fast they were. Certain that she was right in thinking that speed might be key to finding or catching up to a unicorn, Vini remembered Charlie's offer for her and Lydyu to help, which she felt she might someday need to take them up on.

The parents of Albert and Louetta picked their children up early Thursday morning. They managed to fit four of Louetta's large canvasses into the back of their SUV. The others would simply have to stay at the mansion. Louetta and Albert would be coming back for a visit over Christmas. Until then, they planned to keep in touch with Vini and Sam. After giving Vini a hug, Louetta said, "Tell Charlie goodbye for me. I'll see you both over Christmas."

Just after they left, Vini discovered that Mr. Galloway, through Sam, had invited Mrs. Doyle and Vini over to see his topiary project, which he had really been going to town on, and making great progress. Shortly after ten o'clock, they headed over to see his anteater, frog, gorilla, penguin, ostrich, turtle, butterfly, owl, and several other creations, all of which were absolutely delightful.

Though not as large as Mrs. Doyle's property, Mr. Galloway's home did sit on nearly two acres. And it was chock full of all kinds of evergreen bushes and trees just right for making topiaries. Vini thought he would likely have a whole zoo of them when he finished, if he ever finished. Getting to see the butterfly close up was a treat, as it was a little hard to see well from the road. Though she probably shouldn't have been, Vini was still a little surprised that Mr. Galloway had become this playful with his gardening, particularly when he mentioned next planning to work on a couple of dolphins, and possibly an elephant if he decided to tackle those laurels in the corner, or maybe a lion instead. *What fun!*

Possibly because Louetta and Albert had just left, with not having as many people around as there had been for the past couple weeks, Vini found herself feeling a little down in the afternoon. And in specifically thinking about the ordeal in Odd Town, and the demon that was after her, she again felt vulnerable and fairly small, and like she would never be capable of doing much. With Mr. Galloway's mention of a lion, the thought of being able to roar with power had flitted through Vini's mind. However, in her darker thoughts of the afternoon, she realized that in being something of a scaredy-cat, she felt barely able to whimper out a meow, much less a roar, and she couldn't see this changing much in the future.

Tulko took Vini for a ride in the evening, which made her feel some better.

In trying to further pull herself out of her melancholy mood, just before bedtime, Vini read the bible, which always served to lift her spirits. Tonight was no exception, particularly when she came across one of God's promises to her, one she had read before and recorded in the back of her binder, from Isaiah 58:8. "...the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard." She had recorded many promises in recent weeks, things she had come across while reading that she felt very sure were messages from God, who was reassuring her in her self-doubt and feelings of smallness. Consulting her notes, Vini reminded herself aloud, "God is always with me. He will never leave me. He clears a path in front of me. He is my rear guard. He holds my right hand. He will go before me and level mountains. He will break in pieces doors of bronze. God will protect me, help me, and give me strength. I should not fear. When I run, I will not stumble. Even to my gray hairs, He will carry me."

With these blessings on her mind, Vini slept very well, and even dreamed that Tulko took her for a visit to the ideal world of Louetta's mind and painting, an exquisite place where birds that looked even more beautiful than birds of paradise sang songs that could nearly melt the heart and soul. In fields of gold and purple, full of flowers as tall as basketball hoops, an assortment of fairytale-like beasts frolicked about, wrapped in rays of soft sunshine. As Tulko soared over one corner of an isolated field, Vini was almost sure that she caught sight of a unicorn. In addition to being kind, generous, hospitable, and extremely happy, the people occupying this world moved about as gracefully as if floating. They also appeared to be exuding some sort of shining light from within. Feeling very at home in this setting, Vini thought, *God is making me into a creature fit to live here.*

Getting ready for work the next morning, Vini recited more of God's promises, to help her get ready to face the day. "He will turn darkness before me into light, and turn rough places into level ground. God will comfort me, and everlasting joy will be upon my head. He will have compassion on me, and He will not forget me."

At work, though she was having an otherwise wonderful morning, while dusting the contents of a curio cabinet, Vini accidentally broke a small piece from the hat of a porcelain jester figurine. "Oh no!" she cried.

In showing Mrs. Doyle, Vini said, “I knocked it into the alabaster elephant. I’m so sorry; I can’t believe I broke this.”

“I can’t believe you went nearly the whole summer *without* breaking something,” Mrs. Doyle said good-naturedly. “Not to worry, it’s easily fixed.” With Vini in tow, she carried the jester to the desk in the butler’s pantry, whereupon, she reattached the piece of hat using superglue. “There, good as new, so no harm done,” she said. Indeed, unless looking super closely, Vini couldn’t even discern the crack.

Charlie met Vini at church on Sunday for the service and bible study. Afterwards, Charlie’s dad picked them both up because Vini had been invited to Sunday lunch at the Orr house, which was yummy lasagna, salad, and homemade bread sticks with spumoni for dessert. The noodles for the lasagna were also homemade because Charlie’s dad was teaching her to make as many things as possible from scratch.

Vini was pleased to hear that word of Charlie’s talents had spread amongst Mrs. Doyle’s friends fairly quickly. Even aside from Mrs. Ellis’ bridge party, Charlie was already scheduled to cook for two events—a baby shower and a birthday party. It seemed likely that Mrs. Doyle and her friends would be keeping Charlie very busy for the fall.

During dessert, Vini noticed that Mr. Orr was again drinking his coffee directly from the glass carafe.

Smiling, Vini asked, “Do you take your carafe with you to work each day?”

“Oh no, he has something much better,” Charlie answered, at which point, Mr. Orr proceeded to show Vini his collection of antique glass thermoses, which he had a great affinity for.

“They just keep coffee hotter than newer thermoses,” he told Vini, “and I think coffee tastes better in glass.”

Chapter Thirteen

Clocks and Shoes

Mrs. Doyle's long-term housekeeper, Violet, arrived back home on Sunday, and she was already at the mansion when Vini came to work on Monday morning.

Vini might have felt a little awkward, except that Violet was thrilled to meet her and actually gave her a big hug. "I can't believe you cleaned the basement," she told Vini. "Thank you. I've had that on my to-do list forever. And it's such a relief. Now I can just do maintenance cleaning down there."

Having never met her before, for some reason, Vini had imagined Violet would be in her thirties, but she actually appeared to be in her late forties or early fifties. As Vini tagged along with her, Violet exclaimed, "I'm so glad you were able to come for the summer. And I'm sure Cousin Frances has told you that she wants you to keep coming, if your school schedule permits."

"This is the last week of summer for me," Vini replied. "I talked to Mrs. Doyle about coming Saturdays starting next week, or Sunday afternoons instead sometimes, if I end up having something else scheduled on a particular Saturday. I can come on certain school holidays too, like Labor Day and over Thanksgiving, if she wants me. And my parents are okay if I once in a while come after school, as long as I still get my homework done."

"Sounds good to me," Violet said, earnestly. "I'll be glad of a little time off, especially because my husband is retiring next year, around May or early June. He works overseas, but comes home every couple of months. This is his last year of that, thankfully, and we're looking forward to spending more time together when he comes home for good."

The rest of the week passed fairly quietly, with Vini pretty much following her same work schedule. When she and Violet were caught up with everything, they helped Sam some in the garden.

Vini had Thursday off to go back-to-school shopping with her mother, who had already taken Preston the day before.

When school started, Vini discovered that high school wasn't nearly as bad as she imagined it might be, particularly with having Charlie as a friend, and with having more confidence and energy than she seemed to have for most of her middle-school years. To Vini's surprise, the classes were actually somewhat interesting, with a couple even being fairly challenging, which made up for others that weren't.

Vini did make the junior varsity water polo team, known as the Silver Cygnets. Being on the team wasn't going to be much of an interference with other activities because they only had five games scheduled for the fall, the reason being that the coach felt it was more important for the junior varsity team to concentrate on training, rather than competing. They had practice only once a week, aside from the Water Polo PE Class three times a week. In spending much of their time practicing with the varsity team, known as the Silver Swans, the younger girls were gaining good skills, with an eye toward being on the varsity team in the future.

Vini ended up doing very well in school, getting all A's and B's. It helped that she and Charlie studied together sometimes. With Charlie's volleyball activities not taking up much more time than Vini's water polo, the girls had plenty of time to spend with one another. Vini didn't see Sam much, other than occasionally on Saturdays, and then only for brief periods of time, because he went to a different high school, so she had little time to wonder more about his hot-and-cold friendship streaks.

Preston ended up seeing more of Sam than Vini due to archery practice and because Mrs. Doyle occasionally hired Preston for odd jobs like weeding and moving dirt and rocks around in the garden. As far as Vini knew, her brother didn't have any clue that magical creatures frequented the estate because none ever seemed to be around when he was present.

Since Vini hadn't received any further messages about a possible trip to Italy, she resolved to continue to wait until she for sure heard from God, because she knew His timing was always perfect. As she was keeping fairly busy with school, water polo, work, and chores at home, Tulko ended up taking her places only once or twice a week. But even while carrying out her regular activities, Vini could often sense the

wind horse nearby. It seemed he was keeping watch on her, which suited Vini fine as she always had in the back of her mind that she needed to be wary of Kugari, and Satan too, of course, since he didn't always send agents to do his dirty work, but often practiced his deceitfulness and tempting directly on specific human beings.

On an outing in late August, as they were flying about, Tulko suddenly set down on the church rooftop that was home to the gargoyle Vini had seen move in the summer. Several gargoyles occupied the edges of the rooftop, but Tulko had landed nearest the one in question. Dismounting, Vini approached the statue cautiously, naturally, since she had never met a gargoyle before. Not that she would be officially meeting one tonight, because he never moved and she couldn't feel any sense of presence as she might have around other magical creatures; but there was a specific reason Tulko had brought her here. An ornate dagger, somewhat long, lay just beside the bird-like reptilian statue, complete with a sheath attached to a special kind of shoulder harness that reminded Vini of holsters worn secretly under the jackets of detectives on many TV shows. Both the dagger and harness were small enough for Vini to wear unseen under a loose-fitting long-sleeve shirt or an over-sized sweater.

Though she hadn't sensed any life from the gargoyle, or seen any movement, as Vini picked up the dagger, a thought suddenly laid itself onto her brain. *I've been keeping this for you.*

As the gargoyle had seemingly placed these unspoken words directly into her mind, Vini responded likewise, with the hope that the gargoyle would somehow be able to hear her reply. *Thank you.*

Again, the statue didn't move; nor did Vini's brain hear any additional thoughts. In truth, though often assigned as protectors for specific human beings, gargoyles rarely communicated with any creatures unless it was necessary to do so. In this instance, the one-sentence thought was all that was needed to let the human know that it was okay to take the dagger, which had been placed in his care for safekeeping until the horse and girl came for it.

At home, in thinking about the dagger and the gargoyle, Vini suddenly wondered if it was God Himself that had placed the message onto her brain. *I've been keeping this for you.*

No, surely not. This didn't seem in line with the kinds of messages she had been getting lately that she felt sure were from God. However, in recalling her confusion over the clock-chime message—as to the exact sender of the message, and as to whether it was a warning to stay away from the shadowy garden corner or a call to investigate—Vini realized that she needed to continue to be careful in both listening to and interpreting messages. Since she knew that demons and other servants of evil could plant thoughts and ideas into people's minds, which was how they often tempted and influenced human beings toward evil, she resolved to be on her guard, wary, and discerning. *Stay sharp,* she told herself. *And be as sure as possible that the direction is from God. Pray about everything, and ask for God's guidance, before acting.*

However, the more she thought about the experience in Odd Town, she felt it likely God had allowed her to end up there for some reason, possibly as a training exercise in resisting evil or standing up to demons. Or maybe just so that she would know what a demon might look like, except that she had read that they were shapeshifting and could possibly look like just about anything.

Walking to work on the last Saturday in August, Vini noticed Mr. Galloway hard at work on his topiaries. Also noticing Vini, he bounded from the back lawn to the front to invite her to take a closer look, which Vini gladly took him up on. A camel and a moose had both joined the zoo, along with a smaller butterfly to keep the larger one company. The shrub Vini had once thought resembled a rearing horse, or possibly a unicorn, had become a pair of leaping dolphins.

"There are still many more to be made," Mr. Galloway stated breathlessly. "I don't know why I got so inspired. I think because we had such a lot of rain in the spring, and the growth spurts of the bushes. I guess I thought that if I was going to do a lot of pruning anyway, I might as well do something creative, more creative than just the balls and spirals."

Sam was also hard at work when Vini arrived, trimming ivy along a stretch of fence near the side gate. In stopping to say hello, Vini noticed something strange. She had recently started being able to sense when Jelzey was in the garden, though the presence of the firebird was less pronounced than what she felt with either Tulko or Lyydu; it was still powerful, just in a subtler kind of way. Vini had reasoned this to be

because wind and thunder, even from a distance, were often more quickly discerned by human senses than fire might be, since the warmth and crackling sound of a fire, and even the smell of smoke, would need to be fairly close by in order to be noticed.

Not only did a puzzled Vini get a very different sense of presence from the firebird hovering beside the ivy today, but the creature also looked darker than ever before. As the answer suddenly hit her, she said to Sam, "That's not Jelzey, is it?"

"Very clever," Sam replied, smiling. "No, it's not. This is Beme, twin brother to Jelzey."

"So there's a pair of them," Vini stated. "He's darker than his sister."

"Correct," Sam confirmed, "and possibly a little shyer. But that would be normal for siblings, for one to be more outgoing than another."

"How true," Vini said. "My brother's a lot more outgoing than I am."

"You have good eyes, to be able to distinguish the colors," Sam said. "I still get confused sometimes."

"They feel different too," Vini replied, "the presence, I mean."

Anxious to get to work, and slightly anxious to put some distance between herself and Sam, who was acting oddly friendly towards her again, Vini hurried inside.

Violet had been taking Saturdays off, and had been leaving Vini notes as to what needed to be done, which this morning ended up being dusting and dust mopping on the second and third floors, and one load of laundry. Mrs. Doyle had evidently gone to visit a friend for the morning.

Alone in the house, Vini especially noticed the clock chiming. While wary, she still paid close attention. Twice, when the number of chimes didn't match the time, she recorded the numbers.

Nearing noon, on a visit to library, Vini was digging in her backpack for a pencil when she came across the library key Mrs. Doyle had given her. Again admiring the intricate design, Vini remembered that she had wanted to compare it to the metal cross hanging on the wall in the music room. In doing so, she noticed that the scrolling details in the top part of the key were very similar to the embellishments of the

cross, but not identical. She briefly wondered if she should give the key back because Mrs. Doyle never locked inside doors anymore, that evidently having been just a phase after being mugged. However, upon considering, Vini decided keeping the key was probably a good idea. If Mrs. Doyle ever did decide to lock the library again, Vini still wanted to have access.

Come to think of it, Vini seldom used the outside key either because Mrs. Doyle most often already had the back door unlocked by the time Vini arrived. Even this morning, it had been left unlocked, probably by Mrs. Doyle, but also possibly by Sam who had a key as well. But since it might sometime be locked, Vini was glad she had a key, which she always remembered to bring with her.

Mrs. Doyle arrived in time for lunch, and had a surprise gift for Vini, a journal. "You're always writing in a binder," Mrs. Doyle said, "but I thought you might like to put some of your notes in a journal. That's what I did when I was your age. I used to do a lot of research too, and that's how I kept it all organized, by filling journals."

Vini was delighted with the gift, though she wasn't sure about putting her scribbly notes into the lovely journal, which had a fancy cloth cover with a design of flowers and vines. The bookplate in the front of the journal had an equally fancy design, and was just waiting for Vini to add her name.

"And when you fill that one up," Mrs. Doyle said, "I'll get you another one. I think girls should definitely write in journals. It's very good to write things down, and writing is a very good habit to get into."

After rinsing the lunch plates, Vini told Mrs. Doyle, "I'm off to fold laundry. Then I think I'll sweep the porches and sidewalks. It's not on the list, but they look like they could use it."

"I'll fold the laundry," Mrs. Doyle said. "And why don't you save the sweeping and spend the afternoon in the library."

The offer was very tempting, particularly since Vini hadn't been able to spend as much time in the library lately, so she gladly accepted.

With the house in the afternoon being nearly as quiet as it had been in the morning, Vini once again heard clock chimes that didn't match the time; and she made sure to record the number. *That's three times in one day, she thought, it must mean something.*

Just before leaving for the day, Mrs. Doyle asked for her help once again in trying to close more tightly the chimney flue in the parlor. “I tried again last night to get it to move,” Mrs. Doyle told her, “but I can’t get it so budge.”

Vini had no better luck, in either pulling the flue more tightly closed, or in getting it to open so it could be readjusted to close better.

“It just feels so cold in here sometimes,” Mrs. Doyle stated. “It must be a draft from the chimney. I’ve felt around both windows, so it can’t be coming from there. Oh well, maybe I’ll call the sweep sooner, rather than later.”

Vini too had noticed the coldness in the parlor several times while cleaning, which seemed odd to her for summer and early fall, especially with the way the morning sun on the windows warmed the room.

While walking home, Vini happened to see Sam speeding by on a side street on his bicycle, which surprised her because she assumed he was going to finish weeding the iris bed before going home, a task he had only begun as she was leaving.

After dinner that night, Vini added her name to the bookplate in the journal, her full name, Lavinia Marie Aberdeen. For some reason this seemed to fit, probably because it was a fancy journal; therefore, a somewhat fancy name was appropriate.

During her afternoon in the library, Vini had discovered a book on magical creatures that she hadn’t noticed before, which seemed very odd because she had thought she was familiar with just about every book on the three shelves dedicated to mythology and folklore. But, then, there were so many books, she could hardly be familiar with them all. However, she did briefly wonder if maybe some of the books in that section were somehow multiplying, perhaps magically. For all of the wondrous things happening lately, Vini wouldn’t rule out books doing something supernaturally spectacular on their own.

Reading a chapter of the book before bedtime, Vini came across a mention of thunderbirds suggesting that angels had once used the creatures as messengers. *I wonder if they still do*, Vini thought, making both a binder note and a mental note to remember to tell Charlie.

Vini had decided she would use her journal for notes, since she had never wanted to keep a journal in a traditional way, like many girls did, in recording daily events or ideas. But she would probably only put the

notes she thought most important into the journal, and not the majority of her scribbling. She also vowed to enter the notes carefully, possibly first recording them in her binder, then copying them into the journal, so that the journal would stay fairly neat. In recording the most important things in both places, she would have a back-up of sorts, in case she ever happened to lose one or the other. She spent most of Sunday afternoon putting some of her notes neatly into the journal, along with a few extra important thoughts about them.

Monday was the Labor Day holiday; and with Violet taking off, Vini was scheduled to work the full day at the mansion.

Entering the kitchen when she arrived, she noticed a small coffee spill on the counter that was shaped exactly like Italy. Suddenly getting excited, she wondered if it might be nearing time for her to go there. Taking a deep breath to remain calm, she reminded herself to pay close attention to everything going on around her, so that she wouldn't miss any additional messages from God. In starting the day out with the coffee spill, she felt it likely she might get more messages today.

However, in thinking about the odd clock chimes from Saturday, she once again wondered if the first clock message, corresponding to the numbers of yews and privets, was supposed to be a warning to stay away from the shadowy corner, or if the message had possibly come from an unfriendly source trying to lure her there. She didn't get any bad feelings from the clock or anything else in Mrs. Doyle house, other than the occasional odd coldness felt in the parlor, which was probably some sort of sneaky draft, somewhat common in older houses. In thinking everything through, Vini decided the clock chimes had likely not been part of the demon lure, because she and her friends had only ended up feeling the lure and being drawn in when they were in super-close proximity to the privets. Vini also considered the possibility that the first clock message had been something of a suggestion about making the yews and privets into topiaries, to make that corner less ominous. Mrs. Doyle had recently decided that Sam could make a couple of the privets into something, but she hadn't settled on what yet. Bees, dragonflies, and flowers were the top choices so far. Since he was nearly finished with the line of yew mushrooms, she would probably decide soon.

Confident that the Saturday chimes as well were probably from a friendly source, Vini made sure she had the numbers recorded in both her binder and her journal—fifteen, seven, eleven.

Just before leaving for work in the morning, she had accidentally knocked her clock off of her dresser. With quick reflexes, she had managed to catch it. With clocks on her mind so much lately, Vini couldn't believe she hadn't realized the significance of the incident, as a sign or additional message, until just now. The chiming clock in the mansion likely was vitally important, and she needed to continue to heed whenever it was talking to her.

On the subject of clocks, Vini also remembered something she had pondered before, about Tulko being part of the workings of the clock of nature, or perhaps of the universe, and she wondered if human beings might also be part of an intricate clock God designed to help make everything run properly. And if the whole universe was like the workings of a clock, then things like feng shui absolutely made sense as being part of it, particularly things like birth elements and dispersion of bad energy. Vini had recently had a discussion with Mrs. Doyle about adding wind chimes to a couple of balconies and moving a small table in the library to a better location, to make the room flow better and feel more comfortable. Mrs. Doyle had been very receptive to the suggestions, and had already moved the table. On the subject of the wind chimes, she was still considering. Being a light sleeper, she wanted to make sure any chimes added closer to the house than one in the peach tree were not the clanging kind, but softer and more musical in their singing.

While the clock chimes were definitely important, Vini reminded herself to pay attention to everything. Recalling other forms of messages such as the coffee spill, clouds, and tapestry, she suddenly felt an odd sort of push, as if an invisible hand was scooting her along the second-floor hallway. As suddenly as it had started, the pushing stopped and left her standing directly in front of a large woven tapestry featuring an elaborate banquet feast in a castle.

Holding her breath as her eyes scanned the wall hanging, she discovered a bible quote across the bottom that she had never noticed before. She still had her backpack with her because she had just been heading to the library to store it for the day. Pulling her binder from the

pack, she copied the quote of Acts 7:33. “And the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the shoes from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.’”

If this wasn’t a message to her, Vini felt the tapestry might have been made for the entrance to a church or an abbey. When she got to the library, she carefully copied the quote into her journal. Surely it was a message because Vini had actually dusted the whole tapestry before with a lambswool duster, and had not noticed the quote at that time.

Vini was reassured not two minutes later as Mrs. Doyle peeked her head into the library to ask her, “Will you please carry that box of shoes up from the basement sometime today? I’m going to drop it off at the thrift store on my way to the post office tomorrow.”

“Will do,” Vini replied, smiling in recognizing that the word, shoes, which she underlined in her journal, was clearly the most important part of the message.

A little while later, when coming up from the basement with the box of shoes, Vini heard the clock chime exactly twelve times, when she knew it was only nine. Writing the number down just after lunch, she recited, “Italy, shoes, twelve—three message in one day.” And it suddenly all made sense, like a specific plan. In glancing at her notes, in which the three key words were underlined, it almost seemed as if she had been given a set of directions to follow to reach a destination—like turn right at the stop sign, go through two intersections, and take a left at the next light.

Italy, shoes, twelve, and possibly the numbers I wrote down from the Saturday clock chimes too. It seemed she finally had enough information to act on. *It’s time to go to Italy,* she told herself.

Tulko could take her, maybe early Saturday morning. Both of her parents would be working, and Preston wouldn’t be at home because he was having a sleepover on Friday night. Since he wouldn’t be back until the afternoon, no one would notice that Vini was gone. Plus, if someone did notice, they would think she had gone to work at the mansion.

But would Tulko automatically know where to go in Italy? For some reason, Vini thought he probably would.

Vini briefly thought that since Italy was shaped like a boot, perhaps the tapestry message about shoes simply corresponded, like a

reinforcement telling her to go to Italy. *Or was it separate? But what could shoes have to do with finding a unicorn?*

In not being able to answer the question, she decided she would simply have to wait and see where they ended up on their trip. With God leading Tulko, she didn't see how they could go wrong. In the meantime, she didn't want to overcomplicate things by too much speculation. She would definitely do what God was directing her to do without question, even if it didn't make much sense. *When God tells you to do something, Vini, she told herself, you do it, without questioning, unless you want to get swallowed by a whale, like Jonah, or possibly something worse.* So if God simply told her to pick up a shoe and bring it back from Italy, she would do just that, or twelve shoes, or twelve pairs of shoes.

She had a little trouble waiting for Saturday, but she did manage to.

Very early on Saturday, before dawn even, and just after her parents left for work, Vini prepared for the trip. She was wearing the dagger, which fit very snugly to her body, over her t-shirt but under a long-sleeve button-down shirt. Fastening only two of the middle buttons, she was able to completely conceal the sheath and harness, but the dagger would still be easily accessible.

Meeting Tulko in the back yard, Vini wasn't at all worried about not having a passport; after all, Tulko could whisk her away pretty quickly if anyone started questioning her.

The trip to Italy took less than fifteen minutes. Being several hours later in the day, Vini felt slightly disoriented at first, with all of the mid-day sunshine beating down on her.

Tulko landed in a deserted and narrow alley of a fairly small town. This location felt very right to Vini as far as what God had intended for their destination. She could sense confidence from Tulko too, as he gave her a nudge toward the main street connected to the alley. He, of course, would be waiting hidden for her.

Reaching the end of the alley, Vini peeked around the corner to discover something of a town square, except that it was circular, and she was delighted to find a shoe shop in direct view across the circle. Nothing appeared foreboding or threatening as it had in Odd Town; in fact, nothing about this town seemed odd, just old. The street was paved with cobblestones that had little mosses and vines growing

thickly between them. Ivies crawled up the old stonework of several of the buildings, and many of the shop fronts had flower boxes overflowing with various kinds of colorful plants. The center of the town circle was both treed and grassy, and contained several benches and planters. Though not particularly crowded, many people were out on the street, going about their daily lives.

The shoe shop, that offered both repairs and handmade shoes, also had a mailbox service inside. Since she didn't speak Italian, Vini briefly wondered if she might need a translator. However, because she felt sure she was being led by God, she decided not to worry about it, and stepped forward confidently, crossing the street and entering the shoe shop.

The lone occupant of the shop was the cobbler, Signor Paterno, and Vini was delighted to find that he spoke English. Smiling at her, he said, "If you're geocaching, you're late. I only did that last year, and the box isn't here anymore."

Vini had heard of geocaching, but she had never known anyone who had done this type of treasure or scavenger hunting. And being certain that she wasn't late, but right on time, she replied, "I'm not geocaching, but I am on sort of an adventure, except that I'm not exactly sure why I've been led here." With Signor Paterno continuing to smile at her politely, she added, "I think it has something to do with the number, twelve."

In thinking only for a couple of seconds, he exclaimed, "Oh, finally, thank you! I was almost afraid no one would ever come." He then led Vini to the side of the shop housing the mailboxes. Indicating the number twelve one to her, he said, "The person I took over the shop from told me someone would eventually come for the contents of number twelve. The box was paid up for forty years in advance, and I was warned not to try to force it open or change the lock."

"Who rented the box?" Vini asked.

"I have no idea," Signor Paterno responded. "The man whose shop I took over never said. He just relayed the message. I'm not sure he particularly knew. He just knew not to mess with it, and that someone would come along one day who would know how to open it."

The lock on the box was a combination lock.

Recalling the three clock-chime messages she had received the previous Saturday, Vini didn't even need to look in her journal to remember them because she had the numbers memorized.

The lock was similar in shape and worked the same as the one on her locker at school, though this one had Roman numerals up to twenty, rather than regular numbers up to forty as the one on her locker had. Holding her breath with anticipation, but also feeling very confident, Vini dialed fifteen, seven, and eleven.

Trying to suppress a squeal of thrill as the mailbox opened (the squeal then coming out as a squeak), Vini took a deep breath and reached inside the box to take out a small key.

Sensing Vini's slight confusion, Signor Paterno, who had been looking on with curiosity, told her, "I'm pretty sure it's a clock key, used to wind a clock."

"Oh," said Vini. "I'm just not sure, at this point, what I'm supposed to do with it."

Vini had gotten a very good feeling about the shoe shop and its owner upon entering, particularly in noticing a lovely wooden crucifix hanging on the wall behind the cobbler's work table. With her gaze once again drawn to the crucifix, as if searching for an answer, Signor Paterno passionately said, "Ah! Gesù is so beautiful!"

With Vini smiling and nodding in agreement, he added, "There is a clock shop across the street. They might have an answer for you."

Agreeing with the suggestion, because it had a definite ring of truth to it, Vini next wondered if she was maybe supposed to buy a pair of shoes from the cobbler; but she was rather worried that she only had American money.

"Well, it's no problem to take American money because I can exchange it easily," Signor Paterno answered her query. "But may I make a suggestion?" As Vini nodded, he added, "Wait until your feet have stopped growing before you order handmade shoes. Handmade shoes are very expensive. They will last you a very, very long time. But they are very expensive."

"Thank you," Vini said. However, she did purchase a lovely wooden shoe horn from Signor Paterno before leaving the shop because she thought it would be just right to save as a Christmas present for her father.

The owner of the clock shop, Carlo Bastoni, also spoke English. However, his son, Cyril, who was about Vini's age and who smiled at her very largely as she entered, evidently spoke English more fluently and ended up doing more of the talking.

In showing them the key found in the shoe-shop mailbox, she said, "I'm on something of an adventure, but I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do with this clock key. Signor Paterno sent me over to ask if you have any ideas about it."

After looking closely at the key, Cyril said something to his father in Italian before addressing Vini. "I wonder," he began, coming out from behind the counter and motioning to Vini to follow him to a particular grandfather clock sitting very near the front door. "We've had this clock forever. My grandfather bought it at an estate sale many years ago. But we haven't been able to sell it because it takes a special key to wind it. It's all handmade, you see, and the key is handmade too. So we might see if your key fits," he finished, with a hopeful note in his voice.

Since Mrs. Doyle always wound her own clocks, and Vini's family didn't own one that needed winding, Vini had never wound a clock before, so she handed Cyril the key.

To everyone's delight, it fitted perfectly; and the clock that had sat so forlorn and motionless for so long, suddenly began to keep time again. Not only that, but the moment the clock was fully wound, a small compartment just below the face of the clock popped open to reveal a folded envelope containing another key, much like a skeleton key, but slightly smaller and having more cuts in it than most traditional skeleton keys.

"Do you know exactly where your grandfather got the clock from?" Vini questioned, hoping that knowing who the previous owner was might provide a clue to her next step.

"No, unfortunately not," Cyril answered.

"Well, then I guess I'll just hang on to this mystery key until I find something else that needs unlocking," she said.

Since Vini was leaving the key to wind the clock with the owners of the clock shop, because, of course, the only proper place for the key was with its clock, Signor Bastoni wanted to give her something in return.

In noticing that she wasn't wearing a watch, he presented her with a lovely pin-on watch, which was something Vini had never seen before.

"Oh, how exquisite, and unique!" she exclaimed. She was very torn between wanting to accept the watch—in order not to hurt his feelings, and because it was a pretty wonderful gift—and refusing because she certainly had not deserved a reward for reuniting a lost clock key with its clock. Plus, she was taking another key, basically in exchange for the one she was leaving.

In sensing her reluctance to take the gift, but also knowing that she wanted to, Cyril told her, "Please, take it. If we decide to part with the grandfather clock, which might be hard because we've grown attached to it, we can sell it for much more than the watch is worth. And we wouldn't have been able to sell it at all before because no one would buy a clock that doesn't work."

Smiling, Vini accepted, and earnestly thanked Signor Bastoni.

"Nurses used to wear this kind of watch," Cyril explained. "They needed pinned-on ones because they washed their hands too much to wear watches on the wrists."

This was exactly why Vini didn't like wearing a watch; she had her hands in water too often to be comfortable wearing one on her wrist.

"You can tell your parents to check with me before you leave from your visit," Cyril offered, "if they have any questions about how you got the watch."

"Oh, they're not very nearby," Vini said, suddenly realizing he must have thought she was a tourist on vacation with her family.

"Well, if they question later," Cyril added, "you can always tell them that you got it from a pen pal; and they can write to me so that I can confirm I gave it to you." Handing Vini a card with his name and address on it, he added, "Then if *you* write to me, it will all be true, that we are pen pals, that is."

Blushing slightly, as Cyril was again smiling very largely at her, Vini replied, "I *will* write to you. I don't have any pen pals. That would be fun."

With a wave goodbye as she left the clock shop, Vini quickly made her way to the narrow alley to rejoin Tulko. "They thought I was a tourist," she told him, with a grin. "And I found something I'm sure is important."

Since they had finished their task rather quickly, Tulko decided to take Vini to do a bit of European sightseeing.

Within only a few short minutes, they had circled the Eiffel Tower, passed very close to the face of Big Ben, and visited a fancy castle Vini would later realize was Neuschwanstein Castle in Germany.

While seeing the lovely sights, Vini suddenly realized that never before in her life would she have been brave enough to go to a foreign country on her own, much less enter a shop and talk to foreign people as she had just done. Smiling, she thought, *Even aside from Tulko, God has given me wings, and a voice, and the courage needed to carry out His work.* Saying a silent prayer of thank you to God, she felt very strong, purpose filled, happy, and almost fearless.

Unfortunately, her feelings of bravery were not destined to last, at least, not long on this particular afternoon.

Flying above miles upon miles of picturesque mountainous countryside, in Austria to be exact, Tulko suddenly decided to set down in a grassy deserted valley, the reason being that he had been drawn to a particular type of mist—long strings of rolling mist specific to afternoons in certain European mountain valleys in which he often liked to frolic and play, as it felt much to him like a regular horse might feel when rolling in soft grass.

Dismounting so that Tulko could roll around in the mist as he wished, Vini was glad she had worn long sleeves because it was somewhat cool on the mountain.

Kugari happened to be nearby, but very much by design and not at all by chance. In knowing that wind horses were drawn to this type of mist, and in knowing the girl's travel plans (because she had rather stupidly spoken of them aloud to her doll while believing herself to be alone), he had planned, followed, watched, and waited, in almost certainty that Tulko and Vini would pass over this valley on their return trip.

Being distracted in his play, Tulko never sensed Kugari. Nor did he consider the danger as his frolicking put several miles of valley floor between himself and his charge.

Smiling with smugness, the demon simply waited until the girl was well separated from the horse; then, he attacked.

Completely taken off her guard, Vini was knocked flat in an instant by one of Kugari's huge wings as he swooped down from a grouping of boulders behind which he had been hiding. With his prey on the ground, Kugari landed, intending to pin her down with one of his clawed feet, while tearing her to shreds with his hands.

Though the wind was knocked out of her, the grassy-soft valley floor had slightly cushioned her fall, leaving her oriented enough to react, which she did, drawing her dagger and slashing at the gnarled foot that had just stomped on her abdomen. Thankfully, Kugari's foot had met the toughness of her jeans, which were thick enough to provide protection against being pierced by his claws. After two stabs to the foot that was pinning her, his right foot, which caused the demon to howl with pain, Vini swiped at his left foot resting on the ground. As she managed to gash his ankle, he stumbled backwards.

While Kugari hadn't expected the girl to be armed, he even less expected Dara to swoop in and knock him off of his feet much as he had knocked Vini off of hers. As Tulko came charging in next, the lone demon was left with little alternative but to flee, and quickly. Though he probably could manage to hold his own against a single wind horse, for a short time at least, he wouldn't have lasted long against two.

Blast them! Kugari thought as he soared away, his right foot and left ankle hurting fearfully, almost searing with pain. *It should have all been done with very quickly. Blast that knife! Blast the girl! Blast every wind horse in existence!*

Unfortunately, the cuts of the dagger were not severe enough to dispatch Kugari. Although they would fester some, they would end up healing rather quickly because the wounds were fairly shallow.

Kugari was still fuming when he arrived at his favorite hiding spot, in a snug corner of an abandoned stone smokehouse on a rural farm in Missouri, many hundreds of miles from Vini's home. In this place of comfort for him, he would spend time regrouping, healing, and making another plan, hopefully a better plan than the one he had just botched.

He couldn't simply swoop down on her while she was walking down Paloma Drive, or while she was waiting to catch the bus for school. For one thing, the horse was usually watching over her, like standing guard, but hovering, of course, rather than standing. But in addition to separating her from the horse, Kugari needed to get her away

from other humans, in order not only to kill her, but to make it look like an accident, or a murder by another human, or a suicide, if possible. Demons were not supposed to advertise themselves; in fact, it was of utmost importance that they carried out their work in secret. If they acted openly, they wouldn't be able to create atheists, or foster atheism in humans already devoid of religious beliefs. While atheists were definitely misguided, they were not stupid. In becoming aware of the existence of demons, they would also be forced to accept the existence of God; and that simply wouldn't do. The deception must continue in order to gather as many souls for hell as possible. Hellfire demanded fuel. Many atheists walked a precarious line. Mainly following a trend, or as a result of family training, being comfortable in the Sea of Sameness, they didn't want to step out to explore other possibilities, particularly not the truth. However, in often knowing the truth of the existence of God deep in their hearts, Satan was in great danger of losing atheists, despite their sometimes stubborn mindsets. All it took sometimes was one question, one experience, one paragraph in a book, one line in a movie, of love or loss or joy or loneliness, it mattered not how small, to turn the person. If demons were constantly stumbling around, showing themselves, not being clever, many people would end up lost, filled with the Spirit, their souls bound to the Creator and His Son forever. This, Kugari, couldn't stand the thought of, the Three, the One, any of it. Just thinking of it made the pain in his foot and ankle sear even worse. He would definitely have to come up with a better plan next time.

Tulko was beside himself, practically hanging his head in shame at having been off playing when he should have been protecting Vini. With sympathetic whinnies and nuzzles, Dara tried to console her brother, because he couldn't have known ahead of time what was going to happen. In sensing that he was disappointed in himself, Vini stroked Tulko's neck as she spoke soothingly to him. "It's alright. I'm okay. It wasn't your fault." Vini was shaken by the attack; but for Tulko's sake, she tried to conceal how frightened and upset she was.

In wishing she could find a way to cheer him up, Vini wondered again what wind horses might like to eat, so she could give him something like an apple or a carrot, or whatever the equivalent of a regular horse's treat might be for a wind horse. She would have liked to

have given Dara a treat too, who had only been in the area because she had been looking for her brother to join in a few cloud-skimming races. Thank goodness she had been nearby, nearby actually being over Libya, which was close enough for her to sense her brother's whereabouts and to head in his direction to find him.

Upon returning home, and in reading one of Mrs. Doyle's books to try to calm down from both the thrill and the fright of the outing, Vini discovered the exact answer to the question as to what magical creatures might eat, which she read aloud to her doll and stuffed unicorn on her bed. (She didn't know, at this point, that she would need to get into the habit of not speaking aloud about certain things, if she didn't want demons or Satan to learn of her plans.) "Most magical creatures feed on the goodness in humanity, which is why their numbers are so rare. If the human race ever improves, if people become kinder, more generous, less self-centered, more caring, and so on, then the numbers of these creatures will likely increase."

Being aware that horses eat a lot, more than most people might imagine, which is where the term "eats like a horse" comes from, Vini could imagine the numbers of magical horses to be somewhat limited, which was completely true. She had been wrong in her earlier assumption that there were lots of wind horses. In truth, there were only two herds in existence in the entire world. And until they had more food to eat, there wouldn't be many more of them.

Chapter Fourteen

The Sea of Sameness

Because Vini had been off on Saturday, she worked Sunday afternoon. She was wearing her watch at work, and Mrs. Doyle noticed and admired it. “I haven’t seen one like it for many years,” she told Vini. Not many people wear them anymore, since wristwatches have become so popular. Good for you,” she added heartily. “Be an individual in a Sea of Sameness. I can’t see why all these kids dress so much alike while saying they are doing it to be individuals; just like the tattoos and piercing. If all their friends are doing it, how does that make someone an individual for doing it too? It just doesn’t make any sense. That’s why I try to support Louetta as much as I can, her art, I mean. Her parents wanted her to be a scientist. She has the brains that could make a success of it, I daresay. But I think she should be herself, not what someone else wants her to be. Plus, I think she’s got some real talent. She could do murals, if nothing else. But I think she’s got a masterpiece in her, or maybe more than one.”

Vini had to agree. She also agreed with the other opinion Mrs. Doyle had been expressing, which was exactly what Vini often hated about school—that many kids were the same, or trying to be the same, as others. According to the people running the education system, everyone was supposed to go to college, even if someone really wanted to be a bricklayer, or a photographer, or something else that didn’t particularly require four years of college. And since no one was made to repeat a grade or allowed to flunk out when they either wouldn’t or couldn’t perform, most of the rest of the kids were being pulled down to a lower level, basically, substandard. The idea was ridiculous—that all kids should be on common ground, being told they can accomplish anything, when some either wouldn’t be able to achieve certain goals or didn’t want careers of a grand or advanced nature. Most students were not being challenged, and few were being put forward as being more advanced than any other students because the educators didn’t want to

make certain students feel bad, or risk being sued by the parents of students unable to meet certain educational standards.

While high schools still had what they termed were Advanced Classes that could count towards college, even these weren't all that challenging, according to a couple of older girls Vini had talked to in her youth program at church, who didn't feel that taking these classes had really prepared them all that well for the challenges of college. And what if colleges started doing just what the middle schools and high schools were doing, dumbing everything down? Then we wouldn't have good doctors and teachers and scientists for the future. The human race in the area of learning and accomplishments was already on a slippery slope, extremely downgraded, and Vini often wondered if there would be any way in the future to stop the slide, or reverse it. Specifically remembering the Life Echoes Challenge, she sighed and thought, *Just more of the Sea of Sameness. Everyone's supposed to be the same. But that idea doesn't make sense, because we are all different.*

Shaking off feelings of gloom, Vini reminded herself of her personal plan, which was to try to get the best education she could, teaching herself if necessary. *That's what books are for*, she thought, recalling that Abraham Lincoln was self-taught.

Vini worked only Saturday morning on the first weekend in September because she had plans with Charlie for the afternoon, specifically, some high-flying fun with their magical friends. Meeting Vini and Charlie at the park near Charlie's home, Tulko and Lyydu swiftly whisked the girls off on an adventure, first to the Andes, then to New Zealand, then to Spain.

They hadn't flown for long when it became obvious that Charlie was very uncomfortable riding Lyydu. Keeping her eyes closed most of the time, she was missing a lot of pretty scenery, not to mention flinching at every dip and turn, hanging on way too tightly, and clearly not having any fun, which all seemed very strange to Vini. In questioning her friend, Charlie soon confessed to having a fear of heights. "I've always been afraid of heights," she said. "Even when I was younger, I never wanted to climb trees, or jump off of the high diving board, or even go on the taller rides at amusement parks."

As they briefly stopped, setting down to view a magnificent remote waterfall in New Zealand, Vini remarked, “Why would God give a thunderbird to someone who is afraid of heights unless He wanted to help you get over that fear? You should go riding more,” she stressed.

Shaking her head, Charlie countered with, “Thunderbirds are not as connected to the air as you might assume. They are more of an earth creature, connected firmly to the earth. I’m not sure curing my fear of heights is what God is up to. I think it’s probably something else Lyydu and I are supposed to accomplish together.”

Vini couldn’t argue with this, as she was sure Charlie would know better than she about her own life.

While they were flying over Spain, Tulko and Lyydu dipped low over a particular mountainside so that the girls could see a bicycle race fairly close up. If any of the riders had looked up, they would have only seen a flurry of sparkling colors streaking the sky as the wind horse and thunderbird made several passes over them. The riders did feel several unusual and unexpected strong headwinds and crosswinds for several minutes as they were riding. As they were heading home, Vini worried about this, telling Charlie, “What if we influenced the outcome of the race, if the wind interfered with someone’s riding? That would be so unfair to the person who was supposed to win.”

“But they were riding close together, basically in a pack,” Charlie answered, “so the wind would have given the same advantage or disadvantage to all.”

“Right,” Vini agreed, understanding and feeling better. “They weren’t all spread apart, so the wind affected all of them in the same way. *Whew*, that’s a relief.”

They ended up taking a brief detour on the way home so that Tulko and Lyydu could help to calm a storm over a coastal city in Mexico. Hovering high above the shoreline and facing the storm which, though already affecting the coast, was still a short ways out to sea, Vini and Charlie were perfectly safe on the backs of their protectors who were basically pushing the storm back. Marveling at the waves churning and clashing below them, the girls felt a power inside Tulko and Lyydu also churning and clashing as the pair zigzagged back and forth in the air above the shoreline, gradually making their way out into the gulf waters, almost as though herding the wind and storm clouds away from

the land. Though Vini and Charlie couldn't discern any specific actions of the wind horse and thunderbird, such as blowing or pushing clouds, whatever they were doing did serve to break up and calm the storm in roughly ten minutes.

As they were dismounting in the park near the area of the swings and forts, which tended to stay fairly secluded, Vini asked Charlie if she had figured out what Lyydu eats.

"No," Charlie replied. "I've tried to give him fruit and pieces of chicken, but he doesn't seem to want it."

In telling Charlie what she had read about magical creatures feeding on the goodness in humans, both girls decided this was probably correct.

Tulko was off quickly after they set down, but Lyydu stayed for a while as the girls were sitting in the swings and chatting. When a family with two young children approached and started playing in the forts, Vini looked around, surprised that she could still feel Lyydu's presence, very near. Though her eyes scanned the whole area closely, in not being able to spot him, Vini quietly asked Charlie, "Where is he?"

To this, Charlie discreetly replied, "Just about five feet to your left. Didn't you know thunderbirds can become invisible?"

Vini had never read or heard this.

"I thought you knew," Charlie said. "You can't see thunder, or earth tremors, as far as I know. That's why I thought it was common knowledge that thunderbirds have the power of invisibility. If it's not invisibility, it's just super-excellent camouflage."

"It's definitely invisibility," Vini answered. As hard as her eyes were straining, she couldn't make out anything, though she could still feel Lyydu's close presence. However, he didn't stay long. Under divine orders, he was soon off to deal with another storm, but this time, to stir one up. As with human beings, who were supposed to obey God no matter what, no matter how odd the commands might seem, creatures such as thunderbirds were also supposed to be fully under His direction.

"You know firebirds can pretty much disappear too," Charlie told Vini. "They can be as small as a single ember. Then they can flare up, of course, when they need to or want to."

“Or if a wind horse gets near to them,” Vini stated, remembering the time in the garden when she first met Jelzey.

The invisibility thing had reminded Charlie. “By the way,” she said, “are you going to the magic-show fundraiser at Sam’s church that he invited us to? He’s in the show, so it would be good for us to go.” Sam had made it to one of Charlie’s volleyball games, and was planning to come to Vini’s next water polo match, so the girls definitely wanted to show support for him as well.

“Oh! Thank you for reminding me,” Vini exclaimed. “I had forgotten. It’s Wednesday evening, isn’t it? Yes, I’m going, if my parents can take me. They’ve both been working late the past couple of weeks.”

“If you want,” Charlie offered, “my dad can pick you and Preston both up, and take you home after. He’s not very busy next week.”

Mr. Orr didn’t at all mind being chauffeur on Wednesday evening.

Though mostly featuring traditional card and rope tricks, and things like pulling bouquets of flowers out of sleeves and rabbits out of hats, the show was a lot of fun. Sam’s part in the show began with the trick of linking and unlinking metal rings, but ended with something much more spectacular, namely, Sam disappearing behind a curtain on the stage, then reappearing again only two seconds later in the back of the auditorium. Preston and Vini were both astounded by this. Charlie seemed unimpressed and almost bored by this fabulous feat, and was smiling as though she knew exactly how the illusion had been performed. When Vini questioned her about this, Charlie simply said, “No, I don’t know how he did it. But I’ve seen it on TV before, so it’s just a standard magic trick, nothing to write home about.”

Ever since her conversation with Mrs. Doyle about individuality, Vini had been noticing the whole Sea of Sameness thing that was particularly prevalent at school. Both girls and guys seemed to be dressing the same, the same t-shirts, the same jeans. One group of girls had started wearing berets, which actually looked weird on a couple of them, particularly because the hats kept sliding off. It all seemed very silly to Vini who thought, *Be a part of a group, by all means, but be yourself too*. However, she realized how easy it was to get caught up in both wanting to fit in and in wanting to have more things. She had recently found herself admiring a certain pair of new shoes one of her

classmates had just gotten. In forcing herself to look objectively at her own shoes, which were fine and matched well with her clothes, she realized that the new shoes would have looked out of place in her wardrobe, and would have made her want new clothes to go with them.

Most of the girls on her water polo team had recently read the same book, a popular mystery novel. One of her teammates couldn't believe Vini didn't also want to read the book.

"It's like a best seller," Terri Spicer earnestly told her. "Everyone's reading it. You can borrow my copy."

"Not right now, but thank you," Vini replied.

"Suit yourself," Terri answered.

Though it probably was a very good book, Vini preferred to put her spare time into her research, and in finding ways to improve her opportunities for learning.

Deciding on a plan of action as far as her education, rather than simply accepting disappointment, particularly in subjects that weren't really challenging her, Vini approached her English teacher, Mrs. Nelson, to ask for a couple of additional assignments.

"I don't want extra credit," she told Mrs. Nelson. "I'm just very interested in learning more about these particular writers and their works. Plus, I really enjoyed the syntax exercises, and the diagraming, and the last essay assignment. I would like to do more in order to learn more."

A little taken aback by the request, Mrs. Nelson replied, "I'll get back to you on this tomorrow," which she did, giving Vini a reading assignment and an essay to write.

"Thank you," Vini happily told her teacher.

When she finished the assignment, which was both fascinating and challenging, she received another.

"It's been a long time since anyone's really taken an interest," Mrs. Nelson confided in her. "I've been teaching for thirty-six years, and with the school curriculum going so far downhill, in my opinion, I was thinking of retiring next year; but I might have to rethink that now. I really do love teaching."

"You're a very good teacher," Vini wholeheartedly admitted. Though the regular classwork that Mrs. Nelson had to teach was pretty much run-of-the-mill, the extra work was completely absorbing.

When Vini told Mrs. Nelson that she had done research into unicorns and other magical creatures over the summer, Mrs. Nelson told Vini of her own love for unicorns (and gnomes, it seemed), and from that point on, many of the extra assignments were geared to classic fantasy, myth, and fairytale works.

Feeling comfortable with her current workload, Vini also asked her Biology teacher, Mr. Penske, for extra assignments, which served to make that class more rewarding as well.

With keeping busy, the weeks passed very quickly and Vini was surprised to find Thanksgiving just around the corner. The week before the holiday, Vini worked a few extra hours to help Violet spruce up the mansion because Mrs. Doyle was throwing a party two days after Thanksgiving, on Saturday evening, which Vini, her parents, and Preston had all been invited to.

Preston came to the mansion both Thanksgiving Thursday in the afternoon and on Friday morning to help spruce up the gardens. He had been coming about once a week to work on the estate, with Sam also teaching him archery after they finished whatever gardening was scheduled for the day. Mrs. Doyle had been right in thinking this was good for Preston, both the work to keep him busy and Sam being a good influence on him. Sam had also been invited to the Saturday party.

Mrs. Doyle was being proactive herself in fighting the Sea of Sameness. For her family Thanksgiving dinner on Thursday, she made meatloaf, a choice that was fine with her guests, which included a couple of local friends, plus Violet and her husband, Dave Nichols, who was home on a visit.

For the Saturday party, though it was definitely Thanksgiving in theme, the menu included seafood gumbo and shrimp etouffee. Mrs. Doyle and Violet made the two main dishes and a few sides including red beans and rice, and several lovely salads. Mr. Nichols made the appetizers that included bruschetta and angels on horseback, otherwise known as bacon-wrapped oysters.

Charlie had been hired to make several desserts ahead of time, but was not allowed to do anything on the day itself because she and her father had also been invited for the party.

Mr. Galloway and his wife, Blanche, were there too. Vini had never met Mrs. Galloway but had seen her several times in her yard

from a distance. She loved gardening too, like her husband, but mostly indoors, and had evidently won prizes for her African violets.

The same two friends Mrs. Doyle had invited for Thanksgiving Day dinner also attended, but otherwise the gathering was fairly small, as Mr. Corrigan was traveling and Sam's uncle had been unable to come with him. It was nonetheless incredibly merry, and full of the blessings of the holiday, particularly since both Mrs. Doyle and Mr. Aberdeen said special Thanksgiving graces before the bountiful meal.

Chapter Fifteen

Sand Dollars

Two weeks before the Christmas school break, Vini found herself wondering what might be next on her quest to find a unicorn. She had continued her research and had discovered other interesting tidbits about the creatures, but she still had no idea how the key she had found in August might fit into the venture. Despite not having any current direction, she was determined to wait on God's timing, not jumping ahead or going off on her own without His lead.

I might not be ready for the next step, she told herself. Maybe I need to learn something first. Plus, even blessings are perfectly timed, and I might not be ready yet for the blessing of a unicorn.

Dusting on a Saturday morning in one of the mansion's upper bedrooms, Vini chanced to see Sam through a beveled glass window, the edge of the bevel making him appear in double, and she ended up looking twice because he really did look like he had a twin walking alongside him. This reminded her of the Hall of Mirrors at the amusement park and, oddly enough, of his disappearing-reappearing magic trick. How easy that trick would have been if Sam had a twin.

In cleaning the bathroom with the jar of sand dollars, Vini pondered something she had been thinking about for a couple of weeks—the decision as to whether or not to go forward with something daring, daring for her at least. Wiping down the bathroom counter, she noticed something new on the counter, a carved onyx lion sitting next to the jar of sand dollars. The lion itself wasn't a new item, as it generally resided on Mrs. Doyle's bedroom writing desk, but it certainly was new to the bathroom. Reminding herself that she needed to find ways to practice her roar, she smiled in thinking that this was probably a nudge in that direction. *I might need to learn to roar in order to face a unicorn, she thought, especially since unicorns might be related to lions in some way.* She certainly thought it likely that this was why God wanted her to wait, to learn to be braver before finding a unicorn.

Glancing into the bathroom in the afternoon, Vini noticed the lion no longer sitting on the counter. Finding Mrs. Doyle before leaving for the day, she asked about this. “Did you put your onyx lion in the bathroom, and then move it again later?”

Mrs. Doyle was genuinely baffled. “No, I haven’t moved the onyx lion,” she said. “As far as I know, it’s still on the desk in my bedroom.”

Vini was baffled too, but only for a second because she recognized the moving lion as another message, basically affirmation that she needed to go forward with her daring plan.

“I doubt Pizzo could have carried it that far,” Mrs. Doyle said, “but I wouldn’t put it past his mischief.”

“Oh, I might have been mistaken,” Vini shrugged. “I just thought I saw it in the bathroom when I went in there earlier.”

In truth, Pizzo had been the one to move the lion from the desk to the bathroom, and then back again, though he didn’t particularly know why he had done it. It just seemed like a very good idea to him. Each heavy trip had taken nearly two hours, but the little puck troll didn’t mind because it was evidently something he was meant to do. Pizzo always paid attention to his good ideas, whether they made sense to him or not, and whether they were productive or not, because they always just felt right, and never like a waste of energy or time.

The daring thing Vini had been pondering was related to what had happened with Boyd, when he got into trouble over the Easter eggs with bible quotes inside. This still surprised Vini, not just the reaction to his handing out religious stuff at school, but because what he was doing actually wasn’t all that religious, the quotes simply being uplifting messages from a book, albeit one known as the *Holy Bible*.

If the quotes had been from a motivational book, the school probably would have been fine with Boyd handing them out. Both her middle school and high school had all kinds of posters up about the importance of teamwork, following dreams, and reaching for the stars. These included a lot of sayings from famous people like presidents, Olympic athletes, and literary giants. But the educators evidently wouldn’t allow anything said by God, about how He will help us or comfort us or protect us, or whatever; and nothing about joy or peace, which were pretty much the only things that could truly satisfy the deepest longings of human beings.

To Vini's mind, it was wrong to allow some forms of free speech, but not others. People should be allowed to share the wisdom and promises of God, which were so important, particularly because God's Word might be the only thing that could give someone in despair enough comfort to go on. Therefore, she had decided to give out sand dollars at school to which she would attach the "Legend of the Sand Dollar," a lovely anonymous poem describing the symbolism found in the dollar of the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ. She had been surprised at how much symbolism could be found on this one tiny sea creature—the Star of Bethlehem, the Christmas poinsettia, the nail and spear holes of the crucifixion, the Easter lily, and five doves released when the sand dollar was broken to spread goodwill and peace. It was truly amazing!

This is the perfect time of year for something like this, Vini decided. After all, it was coming up on Christmas break, not simply "winter break" as the schools now chose to call it. She had thought about abbreviating the message to simply a list of the symbols; but the poem was so beautiful and full of meaning, she decided not to. Just as she would never abbreviate the word, Christmas, she would not shorten this either.

In fact, she had thought it likely that other biblical truths were symbolized in the sand dollar too, possibly even unicorns themselves, as the creatures were thought to be so closely related to water, the sand dollar itself being more related to water than to sand or earth. However, in considering sand as being part of the earth, Vini suddenly thought about her pastor's mention of the four elements really being five, with one being a missing and ethereal element, that of quintessence. This led to her thinking about the four symmetrical holes on the sand dollar, with the fifth one looking much different, and even in a way like a unicorn horn because it was longer than the other four.

In considering the numbers, four and five, something Vini had learned recently in a bible study also sprang to mind—about the four cherubs at the four corners of God's throne, and one missing cherub, Lucifer, now Satan since he fell. The missing angel had been above the others. With the sand dollar turned so that the fifth hole was on top, the five total cherubs could be represented. Keeping the cherubs in mind, could the dollar connect to the four elements, one cherub each to

represent earth, air, fire, and water? Then, the fifth of quintessence could have been Lucifer, whom many people associated with music, as having been like God's Director of Musical Worship. Vini didn't think it too much of a stretch to connect heavenly music to quintessence. In also recalling something she had read that associated quintessence with unicorns, she then wondered if maybe the unicorn was the sort of creature Satan might have been, if he hadn't fallen, full of goodness and purity. Plus, unicorns were often associated with light; and the name Lucifer came from the word *luciferous*, which basically meant bringing light or illumination.

And what if the sand dollar told a much longer story of God, possibly from the beginning to the end of the bible? Perhaps the dollar represented the whole concept of Christ, which was the plan even when the world was initially created, the Trinity certainly having always been, even if the story wasn't fully told or understood until Christ came. Then, specifically relating to the peace aspect, the five doves released to spread peace might relate to the peace Christ will bring in the Endtimes.

Of course, there was no way to put any of this speculation on the card attached to the sand dollar. In fact, she was stretching it to include the whole poem. After experimenting a bit, she discovered that a folded card worked best; and she thought a red ribbon would look best, thin, of course, to be able to fit easily through the little holes of the dollar.

With her mother's help, Vini bought a huge box of sand dollars online, eight hundred in all. From a local hobby store, she purchased twelve spools of just the right red ribbon, and cardstock on which to print the poem. After printing the poem ten per page, Vini used her father's office paper cutter to cut the cardstock so that the edges would be perfectly neat. Her parents, Preston, and Charlie all helped her to assemble the giveaways, Preston preferring the folding and punching of holes in the cards to the threading and tying of the ribbons, which the others were better at anyway.

Vini had, of course, told her parents that she thought the school might suspend or even expel her over this. Despite knowing the possible outcome, neither pushed her to desist. Rather, they wholeheartedly offered their support.

Smiling both inwardly and out the whole time she was cutting paper and tying ribbons, Vini thanked God for her parents, and Preston, and

Charlie, and for many other things as well, such as for giving her life, and for the job enabling her to earn money to buy sand dollars, and for Tulko, and for guiding her on her search for a unicorn.

With Preston expressing that he also wanted to take some of the sand dollars to school to give out, Vini was afraid of him getting into trouble too; and specifically thinking of Mrs. Davidson, she told him that she didn't think it was a good idea. However, her parents didn't agree and encouraged her to let Preston decide for himself. In addition to feeling it was important to stand up for their belief that free speech should apply to all, Mr. and Mrs. Aberdeen had decided that if they were likely going to have one child either suspended or expelled, it might as well be two.

When Mrs. Doyle found out what Vini was doing she bought four large bags of sand dollars containing a hundred each at a bath store to contribute to the cause. She also encouraged Vini to bring all of her supplies for the project with her to work on Saturday. "Then Sam and I can help you assemble them," Mrs. Doyle offered. This was perfect timing because Vini was planning to give out the sand dollars at school on Monday, which was the start of the final week of school before Christmas break, so she felt she needed to act now.

On Friday evening, as she was packing up supplies to take with her to work the next morning, Vini almost chickened out in fear of the probable consequences of her actions. After all, being in trouble at school was no light matter, not even for a good cause. *I can always think about it more, and then go forward at Easter if I decide to*, she told herself.

However, reading the bible before bedtime, she ended up coming across two passages that strengthened her resolve to go forward sooner, rather than later. The first was from Isaiah 51:12-13. "I, I am he that comforts you; who are you that you are afraid of man who dies, of the son of man who is made like grass, and have forgotten the LORD, your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth...." The second was from Matthew 10:26-28. "So have no fear of them....What I tell you in the dark, utter in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim upon the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul...."

Praying, Vini asked forgiveness for almost chickening out, and she realized how silly she had been. God was leading her in this endeavor; she was sure of it. So, of course, what He was whispering to her, she would definitely proclaim. Not only because she didn't want to be possibly swallowed up by a whale, but also because she knew it to be right.

At work on Saturday, while they were having lunch, Vini confessed to Sam and Mrs. Doyle that she had almost abandoned her plan out of fear.

"That's understandable," Mrs. Doyle replied. "But we shouldn't fear anything that we are doing when we know it to be right in the eyes of God."

Smiling, Vini could actually hear God speaking through her employer, providing further encouragement.

"How true," Sam agreed.

Having finished assembling the giveaways, after lunch, Vini and Sam helped Mrs. Doyle string a few Christmas lights on her balconies and on the widow's walk.

"What exactly is a widow's walk for?" Vini asked as they worked.

Mrs. Doyle's voice held laughter as she responded. "In the old days, a widow wasn't supposed to be out and about much when in mourning. So she would just climb out of a window and sit on the flat roof of the porch below. A lot of houses didn't have balconies or porches, so this was like an alternative. Nowadays, it's just tradition to add a widow's walk to houses. Kind of like parlors; they're not much used anymore, but people still like having them."

Observing that the widow's walk didn't have a railing like the rest of the mansion's balconies, only decorative spindle edging about two feet high, Vini ventured, "It wouldn't have been very safe for an elderly woman."

"Oh it's plenty safe," Mrs. Doyle answered. Indicating a chair and small side table, she added, "I read out here sometimes in the evenings because the light's usually still good pretty late on this side of the house. And it's easy to climb in and out of the large window."

After church on Sunday, Vini watched a ministry television program, the message of which was "Don't Miss Opportunities." Again smiling, she thanked God for this further encouragement. As she hardly

ever watched sermons on television, she was sure this was yet another confirmation that she was firmly on the path God intended for her.

Taking two hundred of the sand dollars with him on Monday morning, Preston made sure he specifically gave one to Mrs. Davidson, but not before he had already given out the other one hundred and ninety-nine because he didn't want her to prevent him from doing so.

Vini managed to give out nearly her full thousand during the course of her busy Monday. With some kids wanting two or three to give to family and friends, the sand dollars went fairly quickly. No one stopped her. Mrs. Nelson actually took one, while discreetly telling Vini, "I'm looking the other way." And she literally, and jokingly, did look the other way with her eyes as she fished in the bag to get hers.

One of Vini's water polo teammates, Anna Maxfield, while examining the doves coming out of a broken sand dollar, told her, "To me, the doves look more like butterflies, so I think they might represent something that undergoes a huge transformation, like caterpillars turning into butterflies. According to the bible, when Jesus Christ was resurrected, he was different than he had been before he was crucified. Plus," she went on, "since we're supposed to transform and become more Christlike over the course of our lives, this could represent the new creatures we are supposed to become."

Vini was amazed at the observation, particularly that there might be even more biblical symbolism found in the sand dollar than she had at first supposed. Peering closely at the tiny "doves" in Anna's palm, she could see instantly that her friend was right—they also looked like butterflies, and Vini wondered what other people might come up with upon reflecting on this tiny but incredibly intricate sea creature.

At home on Monday night, Preston, speaking specifically of Mrs. Davidson, said, "If she tells me to apologize, I will politely apologize for not bringing them to school sooner, and for not helping Boyd hand out Easter eggs."

People were allowed to bring all kinds of things to school—games, questionable comic books and magazines, phones, etc. Some even had filth on their phones, like nasty pictures; and some kids used their phones to post ugly comments all over the internet about people they didn't like, or simply couldn't care less about. In thinking of this, Vini felt justified in distributing something positive and beautiful.

On Tuesday morning, she sought Boyd out to tell him that if he decided to hand out anything over Easter that she would help him do so. Thanking Vini for the offer, he told her he likely wouldn't be doing anything like the eggs again. However, he had been thinking about giving something out at school football games, since the games were scheduled after regular school hours and were in a recreational setting, as opposed to classroom. So he would definitely keep her in mind for support if he decided to do this.

With no noticeable opposition on Monday or even Tuesday morning, Vini almost thought no one who might protest cared enough to take notice. Unfortunately, this was not the case. On Tuesday afternoon, having gotten wind of the sand dollars, Vice Principal Rafferty confiscated the final twenty or so Vini still had, not necessarily because he personally objected to the message, but more in fear of the school getting sued by parents who objected to religion of any kind in schools, even in the free speech of its students.

As she had given out most of the dollars, Vini was fine with the confiscation, feeling she had accomplished her purpose.

Principal Fromm was reluctant to act, but felt forced to upon hearing from two parents on Wednesday afternoon who threatened legal action against the school if they didn't suspend the student who had distributed the religious material. Therefore, Vini was suspended from school for a period of ten days. However, since the Christmas break was so near, she was allowed to finish out the week of school; her official suspension would begin when school started again the second week in January, at which time, the school would decide on possible further action.

Preston was also in trouble, as Mrs. Davidson had raised a strong objection. However, the middle school administrators hadn't yet decided exactly what to do about Preston who, when asked to apologize, did exactly as he had planned, which earned him a trip to the principal's office, but nothing more.

In discussing the issue at home, Mr. and Mrs. Aberdeen thought it likely that Preston would also be suspended and decided to prepare for the worst.

Chapter Sixteen

Christmas Break

One of the first things that happened as a result of Vini's bucking the system was Mrs. Doyle offering to hire a lawyer for both her and Preston, which took Vini completely by surprise. Though she knew Mrs. Doyle was fairly wealthy, she had no idea, nor any expectation, that her employer would be this generous and helpful. However, it seemed this was not going to be necessary because on Friday, Vini's final day of school before suspension, Mrs. Nelson took her aside and discreetly gave her information to give to her parents about an organization called the Freedom Rings and Speaks Coalition, FRASC for short, that helped in providing no-cost legal representation in cases such as hers. Mrs. Nelson also confided in Vini that she was very sad about what had happened in public schools over the past few decades. Kids were allowed to disrupt a class, but not allowed to pray in one. The Pledge of Allegiance was no longer said in schools, at least not in this school district. The schools actually gave out condoms, but no one was allowed to distribute anything religious. "I'd love to see some positive changes, more like the way schools used to be, in my lifetime," Mrs. Nelson added. "But *all* people need to have a voice in order for good changes to happen."

FRASC was a national organization comprised mainly of Christian lawyers who offered their services to individuals and businesses free of charge because they were tired of Christians being denied their rights of free speech in many settings, and especially in public schools. A representative of FRASC was happy to talk to both Vini and her parents on the phone, the result of which was an immediate referral to an attorney, Mr. Greene, who worked with FRASC and whose law office was in the same part of the country as the family. After only a brief telephone discussion with Mr. Greene's assistant, an office appointment was set up.

The initial interview was somewhat lengthy, as Vini had a difficult time putting into concise words what had inspired her to share the sand dollars and poem at school. It seemed a long story to tell, once she began to tell it, about how school wasn't very challenging and how she felt the need to ask for extra assignments just to feel like she was getting an education and getting prepared for college. Vini also related how she felt bogged down, very depressed at times, in witnessing horrible things going on around her, such as her elderly neighbor being mugged by a group of teens. She was seeing this kind of ugliness in schools too, like the high school kid in the neighboring suburb who had actually killed another kid. Vini had witnessed fist fights at her high school, just in the short time she'd been attending. Schools didn't seem to be addressing the problem of violence very well. Kids were not being taught good morals, at home or at school. Teachers evidently weren't allowed to teach morals at school, or discipline students. The numbers of suicides kept increasing. But with everything that was getting her down, she found that praying, going to church, and reading the bible really helped. Strengthening her Christianity had definitely brought her out of feeling depressed all of the time; and she wanted to share this with others, to give them hope, to let them know everything in the world wasn't a lost cause.

"I wanted to share what had helped me with others, as a solution to problems," Vini earnestly told Mr. Greene. "God is definitely the answer. He has all of the answers. We only have to look and ask. And He can help us find brightness and goodness in this dark world."

"Why specifically the sand dollars?" Mr. Greene asked

"I know kids are often bored with traditional things," Vini answered, "so I didn't want to just hand out bible quotes or fliers about joining a youth group. I wanted to use something that they could touch and hold in their hands, and something that might get them asking questions. I think the sand dollar is a perfect physical example of God being visible in nature. I was hoping kids would ask, 'How did all of these things, symbols, end up on a sand dollar?' It's like the perfect mystery. And kids love a good mystery."

Within a week, Mr. Greene had filed an official complaint on her behalf, citing not only violation of her rights to free speech, but that the suspension would deny her education vitally important to her future.

Arriving on Saturday, Louetta and Albert were back at the mansion for a full three weeks over Christmas because their parents were celebrating their twentieth wedding anniversary with a trip to Europe. Violet would not be there over the holidays because she was also traveling overseas to see her husband. With Violet gone, Vini would be keeping her summer schedule of cleaning at the mansion, more or less, in working around a couple of other things she had planned.

Mrs. Doyle was throwing a small evening Christmas party the week before Christmas that Charlie, who would also be attending, was hired to cook for. Vini's parents and Preston were invited. They had all decided on a gift exchange by a name drawing, and set a twenty-dollar limit for the amount spent on each gift. Actually, Mrs. Doyle was making this a firm rule, so that people wouldn't go overboard. "People get too much 'stuff' this time of year," she told everyone. "We need to remember exactly what we are celebrating—the birth of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." Vini wholeheartedly agreed and was happy that she had drawn Louetta's name because she would be easy to buy for—art supplies of some sort. Vini was also happy to be busy, which helped to keep her mind off of the suspension.

On the Monday after Albert and Louetta arrived, in being startled by Pizzo popping out from behind the music room door, and in initially thinking he was a rodent, Albert almost smacked the little puck troll with a rolled-up magazine. Shoeing her brother away, Louetta scooped up Pizzo who gave Albert a dirty look while sticking his tongue out at him.

To make up for the almost-smack, Louetta gave Pizzo a tiny box of raisins and a little napkin. Mrs. Doyle brought him a treat of crispy cereal in a tiny bowl generally used for dipping sauces, which was very nice of her considering Pizzo hissed at her for interrupting Louetta's painting.

"Pizzo, be nice!" Louetta scolded, but smiling. "This is her house; she can come in and out of the music room whenever she wants."

Though he did stop hissing, Pizzo continued to scowl, even when Mrs. Doyle placed one of her miniature pieces of furniture, a Victorian settee, on the lamp table so the little troll could be comfortable while watching Louetta paint.

Louetta had brought a tiny canvass with her, around the size of an ordinary playing card, on which she painted Pizzo a small painting all his own, the subject being a garden scene with blooming flowers, lush green bushes and trees, and a special concealed puck-troll door leading to a secret room in the trunk of one of the trees, the door in the painting being visible only to Pizzo, of course, so it could remain special and concealed.

While working on the painting, using her tiniest of brushes, Louetta occasionally consulted the little troll on the colors. If he didn't like a color choice, he made a face; if he did, he smiled and turned a cartwheel for her on the table next to the settee.

When the painting was finished, it needed to dry, of course, before Pizzo could take it. "You can take it exactly at eleven o'clock tonight," Louetta told him.

Unable to even think of leaving and coming back, Pizzo would wait in the music room, watching the clock on the fireplace mantle the whole time. As Louetta was leaving the room shortly before dinnertime, she gave Pizzo a gummy bear, a pretzel, and a strawberry so that he would have something to eat while he waited.

In addition to the painting, Louetta was making her tiny friend a pair of bright red trousers as a Christmas present, mainly because his old brown ones, that he had made himself, were looking a little tattered. With colorful trousers, Albert would never again be able to mistake Pizzo for a rodent. Of course, it was hard for Louetta to imagine anyone mistaking a puck troll for a rodent; while the creatures most often had bushy hair and eyebrows, they otherwise looked just like tiny people. One would have to look very closely to notice that puck trolls have only four fingers on each hand instead of five. And since Pizzo most often wore shoes, having only four toes on each foot wouldn't be particularly noticeable either.

Mrs. Doyle had knitted Pizzo a tiny scarf and hat, which he absolutely loved; but he wouldn't be telling her so. He did almost smile upon receiving the gift, but caught himself just in time, because it wouldn't do to let her know he secretly didn't mind her so much.

On Thursday afternoon, the day before Mrs. Doyle's party, Vini happened to be on a second-floor balcony stringing a few extra Christmas lights when she heard Sam and Charlie talking in the garden

below. Since their voices were lowered, Vini was unable to make out most of the conversation, but she thought she heard Charlie say, “You can’t both have the same name.”

As it was a statement that seemed rather odd, Vini decided to ask Charlie about it in the kitchen later. “What were you and Sam talking about in the garden earlier,” she asked, “something about the same name?”

Charlie seemed confused. “I don’t remember saying that,” she answered slowly, as if trying to recall. “We were talking about a couple of the apricot and plum trees getting old and needing to be replaced. And then I was telling him that we won our last volleyball game.” *Game* sounds like *name*, so you probably just misheard me.”

“Oh,” Vini stated. “I thought maybe there was a mistake with the names for the gift drawing, and that two people got the same name.”

“No,” Charlie quickly replied. “We were mainly just talking about volleyball. But I think I mentioned that beach volleyball and regular volleyball are not the same game. Maybe that’s what you heard.”

Heading off to dust in the parlor, Vini pondered her friend’s response. Though she didn’t get the sense that Charlie was particularly lying, it had almost seemed like she was trying to hide something, and Vini wondered what it was.

Suspicion set in a little while later when Vini was again thinking about the overheard conversation because she was nearly one hundred percent sure she had heard Charlie say, “You can’t both have the same name.”

However, a short while later, Vini remembered that Satan often plants thoughts and ideas into people’s heads, with the express purpose of making human beings suspicious of one another, and to stir up trouble amongst friends. So that was probably all this was—a nasty thought planted by Satan, or possibly one of his followers. Plus, Vini knew that Charlie had drawn her name for the gift exchange. So she might have been asking Sam for ideas as to what to get her, and she didn’t want Vini to know. Refocusing on happier things, Vini reminded herself of something she had learned in bible study. *When Satan speaks to us, remember, God’s voice is louder.*

The party, being a prayerful and joyous occasion to celebrate Christ’s birth, was full of good cheer, fun, and wonderful food.

Charlie's gift to Vini was a cloth-covered box of unicorn note cards that included a fancy pen.

On Sunday morning, having been invited to midday dinner, the Aberdeen family made the long drive to visit Uncle Tim and Aunt Carol. As soon as they arrived, Aunt Carol pointed out several new items obtained in their recent travels abroad. She also showed them new additions to her huge collection of Christmas angels, now topping four hundred in number, which were spread over the whole house. Some were hand painted and numbered; many were from a specific line of collectible angels; others were simply miscellaneous finds.

As Vini and her mother were admiring a hand-carved wooden angel, Aunt Carol said, "Well, this is what the season is all about."

Of course, Vini would have never said this to her aunt, but she couldn't help thinking, *This is not at all what the season is about.*

Aunt Carol next proceeded to show them a catalog from which she had just ordered three more angels. The pages of the purchases were earmarked with the specific items circled, and Vini was surprised at the cost of the angels, one being over a hundred dollars, the others roughly forty dollars each.

In truth, one of Aunt Carol's coworkers had a small collection of angels, which Aunt Carol had noticed and admired on a visit to the woman's home three years ago. In starting her own collection, Aunt Carol had somehow decided she needed to have more than her coworker, and was completely oblivious that it had gotten so out of control as to cause not only financial problems for her and Uncle Tim, but also a problem with storing the collection when not on display for Christmas. Indeed, some of the angels were three and four feet high, sitting in corners, hallways, and surrounding the Christmas tree. Since their house didn't have a basement, and keeping the collection in the garage wasn't a good option due to dust, bugs, heat, and humidity issues, Uncle Tim was having to rent a storage unit for all of their collectibles—Christmas and otherwise, because Aunt Carol also elaborately decorated for Easter, Halloween, and Thanksgiving—the storage unit being one of the things his extra job was paying for. The RareBears too, it seemed, were overflowing the house, with some needing to be taken away to the storage unit as well.

On the drive home, with Preston napping, Vini had plenty of time to think and pray and reflect on the visit. *When I sometimes want more things, things I don't really need, I should remember Aunt Carol and Uncle Tim*, she told herself. For all of the things they were amassing, her aunt and uncle didn't seem happy. But they did seem oblivious as to what might be causing their financial troubles. Though they were both working very hard, they were getting in more and more debt all the time.

A conversation at the dinner table over financial investments had led to Aunt Carol wondering how Vini's parents managed to pay for everything for a family of four. "What are some of your budgeting secrets?" she asked.

Vini's mother answered quite frankly. "Not taking trips to Europe, for one thing, and doing a much smaller Christmas, for another."

"What's the use of working if you can't have the things you want?" Aunt Carol countered.

"We're not lacking in anything we truly want," Mrs. Aberdeen replied. "And there's often some benefit to having to wait for things, or in saving up for them, because we're then sure that we really want them."

Vini actually felt sorry for her aunt and uncle, particularly Uncle Tim, who was looking like a mere shadow of his former self, in being slightly thinner and much quieter than usual. He also didn't laugh much, which surprised Vini because she always remembered him as being boisterously jovial. Obviously very tired from his extra job, Uncle Tim had fallen asleep in an easy chair in the living room after dinner, right in middle of conversing with everyone. In truth, he was very fatigued, both physically and mentally, as he was often worried about their financial situation. But it was hard to change spending habits, and he wanted to make his wife happy, so he couldn't presently see any way out of the mess they were in, other than just continuing to work hard and hope that their finances would eventually work themselves out.

The next morning, since she wasn't due to work until noon, Vini read in her bedroom for a while after breakfast. In the bible, she chanced upon Jeremiah 10:5. "Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they

cannot walk. Be not afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good.” Recalling her conversation with her pastor about idolatry, and specifically thinking about the collection of angels that her aunt felt represented Christmas, Vini thought, *They’re just statues with no power like real angels have. And it’s like giving glory to another when it should be given to God. Angels wouldn’t want that, not unless they were fallen angels.*

But in thinking of fallen angels, and rereading the last part of the quote, she realized that Satan and his followers probably didn’t have as much power as she sometimes gave them credit for. *Be wary, but don’t fear so much*, she told herself. *With God on my side, I have no reason to fear, not even about the school issue and legal stuff.* Suddenly realizing that she was worried about these things, since they were constantly in the back of her mind, the unknown outcomes particularly, Vini took a deep breath and reread the bible passage, which she felt was speaking to her about the school and legal matters, and specifically telling her that her opponents were actually weaker than she might imagine; therefore, she had nothing to fear. Feeling suddenly happy and secure, she said a prayer of thank you to God for reminding her of His goodness.

After praying, she opened one of the mythology books she had borrowed from Mrs. Doyle’s library. Flipping pages, she chanced upon a lovely picture of an angelic figure riding a unicorn, below which was a paragraph describing how unicorns were thought to be a means by which human souls in heaven could sometime visit earth, either to see loved ones or to carry out certain errands as commanded by God. The speed of the unicorns helped tremendously, as the creatures traveled much faster than the speed of light, their movements equating to mere whispers of time. Again flipping, the word “whispers” caught her eye in another paragraph stating that since unicorns were generally too fast to be seen, we might find them by listening for their movements, which sound like whispers.

Vini was off work both Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. On Christmas Eve, the family enjoyed a beautiful candlelight service at their church. Christmas morning, both Preston and Vini were completely happy with three gifts each from their parents. The siblings had pooled their money to buy their parents each one nice gift—their

mother a sweater and their dad a cordless screwdriver. Vini's father was also happy with the shoehorn she gave him as a stocking stuffer.

Although she was working at the mansion the day after Christmas, Vini was scheduled to be off work on the three days following to go to Camp Burberry Wiffle to help with the hippotherapy program. Using the contact information on the business card she had received, Vini had only emailed May Burberry once since summer; but May had remembered Vini, and the plan for her to come work the upcoming summer, and had called over Thanksgiving to invite Vini to come after Christmas, which was one of the busiest times for the hippotherapy program, while kids were off from school.

Charlie, it seemed, had a big surprise that she had been keeping secret relating to this—she would also be working at the camp for the same three days. Unbeknownst to Vini, Charlie had helped out a couple of times for lunch prep during her time at camp while the cook was off grocery shopping. With the assistant cook taking three weeks off the next summer, the camp was going to need to hire someone during that time. Alexandra Wiffle had Charlie in mind and had kept in contact with her. With a day camp and a couple of retreats going on at the camp over the next week, the three days would be like a tryout for Charlie, as well as extra work to help her earn some money. Vini's parents would be dropping them both off; then Charlie's dad would pick them up again at the end of their stay.

Chapter Seventeen

Whirlwind and Hullabaloo

The time at camp was a wonderful escape to take Vini's mind off of being suspended, and she arrived back home feeling happy and relaxed. Of course, she had been praying a lot too, which always helped in making it through trying situations.

A hearing at the administrative offices of the school district had been scheduled to determine if her suspension would turn into expulsion.

Being busy at work and camp, Vini hadn't watched much television lately, so she had no idea of the media frenzy her situation had kicked up in the area. Her parents hadn't wanted to upset her, so they hadn't told her about this. They had also been keeping Preston busy and away from that side of things, with help from Mrs. Doyle who seemed to have a lot of chores that needed to be done this time of year. The family had also chosen not to give any interviews, deciding that side of things was best left to their lawyer.

Many people turned out on the day of the hearing to pray, both outside the building and inside the meeting hall. A group from an organization opposing any type of religious activity in schools, even personal prayer, also showed up. Vini was surprised at their shouting and anger, mainly because it was such a noticeable contrast to the quietness of the various prayer groups. Thankfully, there was no violence, in part due to a police presence and the fact that the school district had wisely hired extra security for the meeting. Mrs. Doyle, Louetta, Albert, Sam, and Mr. Galloway were all there to show their support. Mrs. Doyle had evidently had last-minute t-shirts made up with a sand dollar logo for them all to wear. She would be giving Vini and Preston t-shirts as well, the next time she saw them.

Since she had never been through anything like this before, Vini was a little worried about what she was going to say. But in reading the bible beforehand, part of Isaiah 51:16 just seemed to jump out at her, as

if God were speaking directly to her. “...I have put my words in your mouth and hid you in the shadow of my hand....” Mark 13:11 also spoke to her. “And when they bring you to trial and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say; but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.”

Having the assurance that God would help her with what to say helped to calm her. But whatever the outcome of the hearing, Vini was determined not to be quiet anymore. She would use her voice, roaring if necessary, to make a difference. After all, that’s one of the reasons human beings were put on earth, to make a difference while here.

As it turns out, she didn’t have to say anything at all during the hearing because Mr. Greene did all of the talking for her, and very eloquently. But his words evidently didn’t make an impact. Vini was expelled. Mr. Greene had warned her that the outcome would likely be expulsion, but had encouraged her not to despair because what mattered more was the decision of the court proceedings regarding the complaint, set to begin the following week.

The next day at work, Vini found Louetta working on a painting called *Whirlwind and Hullabaloo* representing the mess stirred up by the sand dollars, and the fuss in general over the larger issue of prayer and religion in public schools. Though the painting was abstract and chaotic, Vini thought she could make out a couple of horses and several birds along the outer edges. As Vini was pointing this out, Louetta confessed that the horses were Tulko and Dara watching over Vini during this crisis. And the birds, while they could be thunderbirds or firebirds, were supposed to represent the doves released from inside the tiny sand dollar, which Louetta was currently working on in the center of the painting, as the start of the whole thing, like the center of a tornado.

Though Louetta and Albert were set to leave before Vini’s court hearing, they said they would be praying for her, for a positive outcome.

Coming to work the next morning, Vini discovered the mansion to be in something of a state of turmoil. Louetta, in going out to the shed before breakfast, had just had an encounter with the creature living out there. Still visibly shaken when Vini arrived, she was on the porch with Mrs. Doyle who was tending to several deep scratches on Louetta’s

arm. Sam, who had been out in the shed looking around, was just coming up to the porch.

In not knowing what had happened, Vini asked, “Did you get into a fight with a cat?”

Shaking her head and fighting back tears, Louetta answered, “No, something much worse. But it looked just like the bag of potting soil. Just like it!” Taking a deep breath, she started over. “I was going to get some soil to repot that begonia on the front porch. But when I touched the bag, it just turned into this monster, with glowing orange eyes and long claws. It was greenish gray and lumpy looking with pointy ears.”

“A hobgoblin, likely,” Mrs. Doyle interjected, “from what you’ve said.”

“It flew at me and scratched me, and backed me into a corner,” Louetta continued. “Then the monkey and giraffes came charging in.”

For a moment, Vini thought Louetta was losing it, in being so upset; but then she remembered the paintings that Pizzo had brought to life for Louetta’s birthday.

“Pizzo was not even around,” Louetta went on, “and they came anyway, to save me.”

“Memory Magic, probably,” Mrs. Doyle explained. “They hold the memory of Pizzo’s magic. Being connected to you, your paintings are probably always watching over you. So they were able to dig deep and come to life again to help save you.”

“I think that’s so true,” Louetta said with a sniffle. “Anyway, the monkey and giraffes distracted the monster, and I was able to get out of the shed. Then Beme went in and routed him out of there, and out into the garden. Sam and I saw him running off. Actually...we didn’t. We saw a bush running off. Then we lost sight of him. Then we saw a rock get up and run off.”

Sam was nodding because this was an accurate description as to what he too had witnessed.

Now that Vini was there, Sam set off into the garden to work for the day, seeming rather indifferent to Louetta’s distress, which surprised Vini who would have thought he would want to be right there, by her side to comfort her, for the rest of the day.

When she finished tending to Louetta’s arm, Mrs. Doyle used a felt marker to draw a bunny near her elbow, just below the scratches, the

concept being that the act of drawing of the bunny tickled and would take away some of the hurt from the boo-boo.

Finishing off the bunny's fluffy tail, Mrs. Doyle said, "At first I thought it was more likely a gremlin in the shed, since they are invisible. But I should have known it wasn't a gremlin. If it had been, everything in there likely would have been broken, especially the mower, because they definitely like breaking mechanical things best. But hobgoblins can be nearly invisible," she went on, "for as good as their camouflage abilities are. A lot of demonic beings can shapeshift and change colors to imitate their surroundings."

"I really thought it was a bag of potting soil when I grabbed hold of it," Louetta said, wiping her hands on the towel in her lap as she said this because they still felt slimy and gritty, though she had washed them well with soap and water.

In noticing the hand wiping, Mrs. Doyle said, "When you take hold of something evil, it takes a while to wear off."

Vini was very impressed that Mrs. Doyle knew so much about magical creatures, and she wondered if her employer might know something about unicorns. Vini had never really thought to ask, which seemed strange to her, especially given the many books on the subject in the library, and the fact that Mrs. Doyle had actually mentioned unicorns the past summer, as possibly hiding in the unused parts of human brains. But with Louetta being so upset, now didn't seem the right time to ask. Plus, Vini had a few other things on her mind, mostly the upcoming legal proceedings.

When Pizzo found out about the hobgoblin, he was very upset with himself, first for not knowing about the creature, and also for not being nearer to his friend when it happened so that he could help to defend her. Lately, when not watching Louetta work, he had been spending most of his free time adoring the painting she had done for him, hung right next to his bed in his snug little den in the basement wall.

In the library later, Vini added a note she had thought of to her journal. "What if unicorns are not just super fast, but also camouflaged like Tulko or the hobgoblin? Or maybe they can become invisible like Lyydu."

As Violet was set to return from her travels in just a few days, Vini took off work for two full days to prepare for her upcoming court appearance.

Continuing to pray and read the bible, on the night before the proceedings were set to begin, Vini received another reassuring message from God, from Jeremiah 15:20-21. “...for I am with you to save you and deliver you says the LORD. I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.”

Though she was expelled, she didn't feel all that worried, somehow knowing that things were going to work out.

Mr. Greene had told Vini that, as with the school hearing, she wouldn't have to say anything in court, if she didn't want to. However, if she did feel comfortable speaking, it would probably bode well for her case, since the issue mainly boiled down to free speech. She did end up telling the judge basically what she had initially told Mr. Greene, as to how the whole thing had come about, the reason she wanted to hand out the sand dollars. And she felt very comfortable in doing so, which surprised her because, although spectators were not allowed in the courtroom, she was talking in front of about twenty people in total, including the various school personnel, her parents, Mr. Greene, his assistant, and the court staff.

The whole argument, both sides, took only two days, and the judge actually sided with Vini, ordering the school district to drop the expulsion and allow her to return to classes immediately. In being reinstated so quickly, she missed less than a week of school, which ended up being easy to make up, particularly because many of her teachers were sympathetic to her cause and helped her to do so.

The media fuss hadn't died down yet, mainly because many people in opposition were angry that Vini was allowed to return to school. And it ended up being even more of a heated frenzy than the whole hearing and litigation had been, with ugly things posted online, including threats against Vini and her family. However, since things posted on the internet were not quite as anonymous as many people seemed to believe, the police easily tracked down the threat makers.

Wisely heeding her parents' advice, Vini refrained from reading anything said online about her issue, as many of the comments were extremely ugly and hateful, and would have likely upset her. However,

her mother and father reassured her that the online chatter included an equal, if not more, supporters of her cause, who were praying for her.

As far as giving out things at school, the high school principal had established a rule stating, “Any organized and planned giveaways at school must be screened and approved first so that anything deemed distracting to the educational curriculum can be reserved for after-school and off-campus activities. Violation of this rule may result in suspension.”

Mrs. Nelson told Vini that, according to her sources, it seemed likely the district superintendent would be adopting the rule to apply to all schools under his jurisdiction.

In telling her parents about the rule, specifically the way it was worded, Vini didn’t see why she couldn’t give things out at her bus stop or even at events like football games, if she wanted to. “Boyd had a really good idea,” Vini said.

“This is a definite victory,” her mother replied. “They had to establish some sort of rule to please the naysayers. But I don’t see why you can’t occasionally still give out things, but on a smaller scale, and in an impromptu manner.”

“Agreed,” her father stated. “Since it says that the ‘organized and planned’ things have to have approval, just don’t plan or organize anything, and you’ll be following the rules. If you want to give things to people, just pick whatever it is up on your way out the door.”

“I think the school might be shooting themselves in the foot over this,” her mother added, “in making it hard for people to bring cookies on Valentine’s Day, or four-leaf clovers on St. Patrick’s Day, or other harmless things. If people organize it, and if it’s deemed a distraction to the curriculum, they’ll have to ban those things too. And that would make schools even less-nice places in which to learn and grow young minds and bodies.”

The middle school, in not having had complaints from parents, mainly just Mrs. Davidson, hadn’t yet officially suspended Preston. They had simply scheduled a parent-principal meeting roughly a week after school resumed, during which they informed Mr. and Mrs. Aberdeen they would be instituting a rule similar to that of high school giveaways, as it seemed likely the rule would be spread across all district schools fairly quickly anyway. In waiting to see how Vini’s

situation panned out, the middle school principal had avoided a good deal of hassle for himself and others. The Christmas holiday had evidently cooled Mrs. Davidson down a bit, who didn't press the apology issue further.

After the meeting with Preston's principal, in thanking God for everything turning out so well, and in reading the bible, Vini came across Luke 1:52. "...he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree...."

So true, she thought, feeling very grateful that God was on her side and always causing things to work out for the best.

And, indeed, they had worked out for the best, though Vini would never know the exact details. With the gift of the sand dollars, eighteen people were saved through Christ fairly quickly, within just a few short weeks, one of which would end up impacting thousands in the future as a teacher. Another would start a ministry program that would bring many more thousands to Christ, those in turn having their own significant influences on the world. And, of course, it was very important to save as many people as possible before the Endtimes, especially because many learned people didn't believe there would be another chance to be saved after the Second Coming of Christ, which could happen at any moment.

Chapter Eighteen

The Dandelion Field

By mid-January, as things seemed back to normal, Vini refocused on her unicorn project, remembering to ask Mrs. Doyle if she knew anything specific about unicorns.

“Just the same stuff you are likely finding in the books,” Mrs. Doyle answered, “such as how they are probably super fast, and how they are connected to water.” As Vini was nodding, Mrs. Doyle added, in a strangely exaggerated sort of way, “Boy am I thirsty! Did you know that human bodies are made of more than fifty percent water? No wonder we get so thirsty.”

As Mrs. Doyle sauntered off, intent on getting something to drink, Vini wondered at her employer’s words and manner of speaking. *Was that a hint of some sort, about water and a unicorn’s connection to water...or a unicorn’s connection to people because they contain so much water?*

Rising to get on with cleaning out a couple of the kitchen cupboards, in glancing out the window, she caught sight of one of the firebirds hovering near the garden shed. Since the creature was currently small, about the size of a baseball, she couldn’t tell from this distance if it was Beme or Jelzey. But in seeing the firebird so soon after having her discussion with Mrs. Doyle, she started thinking about fire and water as being two of the four elements. Beme and Jelzey were obviously fiery. With Lyydu connected to the earth as Charlie had said, and Tulko obviously associated with air, then really only something related to water was missing, which, according to everything she had been reading would be the unicorn. If finding a unicorn would complete the four, she then wondered if achieving a balance of the elements might be all that would be needed to bring more goodness back into the world. But it just sounded too simple and easy. *Surely, there must be more to it than that*, she thought.

High school classes hardly ever took field trips; however, to Vini's delight, on the last Friday in January, Mrs. Nelson and another teacher took their ninth-grade English classes to visit a brand-new branch of the public library during its grand opening.

After touring the library, Vini strolled around outside behind the building admiring a lovely reading garden containing a fountain with a metal sculpture centerpiece shaped exactly like a dried dandelion. Each of the dandelion seeds gave off a light spray of water, making the whole fountain look as though it were bathed in mist.

Looking at her reflection in the pool of the fountain, Vini was again reminded of twins, and in particular Tami and Sami because Sami liked to press flowers. Vini specifically remembered her pressing several dandelions into a book at camp. Breathing in the mist and feeling very relaxed and happy, on a whim, Vini wrote a thought in her journal that had just popped into her brain: *Every flower dreams of being planted by a fountain.*

At work the next morning, Vini was taking a break in the kitchen when Mrs. Doyle passed through on her way out into the gardens. As she was just opening the back door, she tossed over her shoulder, "I'm thinking of putting in a fountain, because it's every flower's dream to grow up beside a fountain."

Speechless, Vini thought, *It's amazing how much alike we think.* And this made her wonder if she might end up being just like Mrs. Doyle when she grew older. *I might even look like her, except, probably not as tall.*

When Vini was in the garden later, she happened to see a tall and lanky boy, with slightly long and somewhat messy blond hair, getting on a bicycle just outside the open back gate. At first glance, she thought the boy might be stealing Sam's bicycle. In taking a few quick steps, and in viewing the scene from a slightly different angle, she saw Sam also outside the gate and another bicycle leaning up against the back fence. Vini also saw a small reddish-gold ball of fire hovering just above the departing boy that she thought was probably Jelzey because she immediately saw Beme with Sam as he entered the back gate.

As Sam came up to the house, Vini asked about his friend.

"Oh that was Erik," Sam replied.

"At first, I thought he might be stealing your bicycle," Vini said.

Smiling, Sam answered, “You have good eyes. His is identical to mine.”

“Did he see Jelzey?” Vini questioned in a slightly worried voice. “She was sort of hovering over him.”

“I don’t think so,” Sam said. “People don’t often look up around noon because the sun would be right in their eyes. So a firebird is probably pretty well camouflaged in hovering above someone this time of day.” After a short pause, he added, “I bet Erik had a peppermint in his pocket. Firebirds are mad about peppermints.”

“What a coincidence,” Vini said, astounded, because she actually had a candy cane in her pocket left over from Christmas that she had been having little pieces of all day.

Seeing Beme hanging out by the shed, she offered him the remainder of the candy cane, which he basically turned his nose up at.

“Weird...” Sam ventured slowly. “Usually he loves them. He must be full. He ate a whole cartload of old newspapers just this morning, at the recycle center over on Ballard Drive.”

What a strange day this was turning out to be, this conversation especially. It was a weird coincidence that Vini had a candy cane with her, but Sam’s statement was even weirder, and not just because she remembered that magical creatures feed on the goodness in humanity, which made it very unlikely either Beme or Jelzey would ever consume newspaper, but more because, once again, just like with the discussion about the cut on his face, his words didn’t quite ring true. Sam certainly was a strange person.

Heading back into the house while shaking her head, Vini recalled something her mother had said on a couple of occasions. “It takes all kinds of people to make up the world.”

At home in the afternoon, Preston was making a lot of noise in the basement, so much so that Vini finally decided to investigate. She found him practicing sword fighting with one of the fake swords. Not only was he sparring with their father’s old punching bag from his college days when he had been an amateur boxer, but also with several large cardboard boxes that were strategically set up. The box the family’s dishwasher had come in had taken a pretty bad beating, and Preston was out of breath when Vini arrived.

“I should have known this was what all the noise was about,” she said. She had seen Preston practicing sword fighting with Sam a couple of times, using small branches. Sam had done a little fencing; plus, he had friends who were into martial arts, specifically the styles that included swordsmanship, so he definitely knew a few moves. Since there was plenty of room in the basement, Vini sparred with Preston a bit before going back upstairs to read.

The weeks just seemed to fly by, and Vini was surprised to find her birthday already upon her in the second week of March, which was also the week before spring break was set to begin. The weather had turned warmer and spring dandelions were popping up everywhere, much to Mr. Galloway’s chagrin because he did constant battle with them. Mrs. Doyle didn’t mind them so much, though Sam was doing some weeding in that regard to keep them from getting out of control. Since they reminded Vini of the library fountain, she thought the dandelions rather beautiful.

With Preston’s birthday being the week before Vini’s, Mrs. Doyle ended up giving them a joint gift of an old pinball machine currently residing in her basement that was in near mint condition, still working and still wonderful. Both Vini and Preston were very excited. Mrs. Doyle had already cleared this with their parents, and the pinball machine was placed into the Aberdeen basement, away from the punching-bag area that Preston was generally the most rambunctious in, of course.

Vini’s birthday fell on a Wednesday, and her mother baked a unicorn-shaped cake. Smiling a little sheepishly, her mother said, “I know you’re getting a little old for unicorns, but I just felt inspired for some reason.”

“I’ll never outgrow unicorns,” she told her mother earnestly. The cake made Vini very happy; and she had an odd thought that even if she never found a real unicorn, things like this would be enough for a truly happy life. Her parents gave her a gift certificate to a clothing store, and Preston gave her a glass paperweight with a dandelion motif for her desk. Incredibly pleased and surprised, Vini examined the weight closely. A Made-in-Japan label on the bottom was the only marking, aside from the lovely design of the flower on top.

Later in the evening, Vini watched a television program featuring cheese making in Japan, which made her briefly think of the paperweight.

On Thursday after school, in looking through a magazine while waiting to get her hair cut at a local salon, she chanced to read a gardening article about how dandelions are sometimes grown for their roots, which some people like as a substitute for coffee. And the flowers were sometimes used to make wine. *So, dandelions are not just a nuisance weed*, she thought. *They can be very useful*. Flipping pages of the magazine, she next found an article about famous beaches in Japan, and she suddenly realized that these were likely messages from God. Just like the ones about Italy and shoes, the messages about dandelions and Japan were probably extremely important. Smiling and feeling a little guilty that she hadn't picked up on the messages the previous night, she said a silent prayer. *Thank You, God, for hitting me in the face with this today*.

Instead of waiting with her daughter at the salon, Vini's mother had dropped her off and was running errands, intending to return for her later. Since she had come early and was sitting near her hairdresser's station, Vini happened to hear part of the conversation Melinda Franklin was having with the customer in her chair, a young woman of about college age.

"Yes, I'm sure that's him," the customer said. "He was going out with one of my roommates, about six months ago."

"That's impossible," Melinda said, with both confusion and stress sounding in her voice.

"Well, I hate to be the one to break it to you, but it's true," the young woman replied, in an almost consoling fashion. "I'm positive."

It didn't take Vini long to recognize that they were talking about the photograph of Melinda's husband in a small heart-shaped frame on her station. Vini knew Melinda had been married for at least five years, which is how long both Vini and her mother had been coming to her for haircuts. Vini also instantly realized that the customer was lying; for what reason, Vini couldn't imagine, but she could definitely hear the lie in the woman's voice.

Melinda was just finishing up the haircut. After taking the customer's money and washing her hands, she motioned to Vini to take

a seat in her chair. Before doing so, Vini calmly told Melinda, “She was lying. I’m sure of it.”

Melinda, who looked pale and who was obviously somewhat distressed because she wasn’t her normal smiling self, didn’t respond right away.

Sitting, Vini went on, very firmly, “The reason I am sure is because I have always been able to tell when people are lying, or up to no good, even when I was a very little kid. It’s just a gift God has given me. I can’t imagine why she wants to stir up trouble for you, but that’s what she was doing. Your husband was not going out with her roommate. I’m positive. So you don’t need to believe a word she said.”

After a pause to think and while she was placing the cutting cape around Vini’s neck, Melinda responded quietly, “It’s called discernment, the gift you mentioned. I’ve read about that. It’s definitely one of the gifts God blesses some people with. Everyone has a certain amount of discernment, but with some people it is very pronounced, and truly a special gift.” With a small shake of her head and a puzzled look, she added, “I can’t imagine why she wanted to stir up trouble either, but I believe you are right.”

“Probably because she could tell you are a happy person, very content,” Vini said. “Some people can’t stand that; they’re jealous and they want to make other people as miserable as they are. So they do whatever they can to make that happen. I think they are under the control of Satan.”

“You’re right,” Melinda answered.

“We just need to pray for people like that,” Vini responded, “that they somehow find their way to the path God intends.”

When Vini hugged her after the haircut, Melinda said, “I’m glad you were here today. I think God sent you to me.”

This was entirely true, as Vini’s mother had originally made the appointment for Saturday, but had changed it when her work schedule changed unexpectedly.

In thinking afterwards, Vini realized that, at this time last year, she might not have said anything to Melinda because she probably wouldn’t have felt confident enough to be that forward. Since most of Vini’s past had been spent in quietness and shyness, she had some difficulty in wanting to talk openly to other people, let alone being able to actually

do so. However, her experiences since last summer had definitely molded her, and Vini recognized this as God teaching her to roar.

On Friday, an early-out day at school, Vini was excited about the plans she was making inside her head for the upcoming weekend, specifically, a trip with Tulko to Japan.

Because both of her parents would be leaving for work early Saturday, Vini was planning to leave early too. Preston generally slept late on Saturdays. Especially with this being the first day of spring break, Vini felt sure he would stay true to form. As long as the house was locked, he should be safe with Vini gone. Their parents had always taught them well what to do if they were by themselves and something happened. Having had a recent review of the fire escape plan, and a reminder of what to do in other cases of emergency, she certainly didn't think she was leaving Preston, asleep, in a dangerous situation. Plus, her parents had planned for him to be on his own for a short time anyway because they knew Vini was scheduled to work Saturday morning. And with Preston planning to meet Sam at the mansion late in the morning to help with gardening and for an archery lesson afterwards, his time at home alone would be short. If he did wake up early, he would probably assume his sister had already gone to work, which is where she would plan for Tulko to drop her off after their trip, probably on the roof, so that she wouldn't risk the horse being seen by Preston if he happened to come early to the mansion.

Being very flexible, Mrs. Doyle never minded if Vini was a little late. But she might not be late if the errand didn't take any longer than the trip to Italy had. With Tulko being so incredibly fast, Vini felt she might actually get to work early, if not on time.

On Saturday morning, she let her parents know she was up just as they were both leaving. Then she hurriedly donned her backpack and her dagger, which she had been keeping behind a box in her closet so that it would be hidden, but still easily accessible. Slipping into the back yard from the door in the den, and making sure it was locked, she met Tulko who was already waiting for her.

Though she had left just before dawn, it was already afternoon in Japan, which Tulko reached so quickly, the journey seemed almost surreal, particularly the way the light came into the world as they traveled, as though someone was turning it on by a dimmer switch, ever

brighter and brighter, until, within only a couple of minutes, it was completely sunny.

Tulko set down on a deserted stretch of glittering beach in Japan. Dismounting, Vini strolled about in the sand, admiring and listening to the ocean while waiting to be led by God. She was thrilled only a couple of minutes later when something along the shoreline caught her eye and she discovered a bluish-green glass bottle, sealed with a cork, containing a rolled-up piece of paper.

“A message in a bottle!” she excitedly told Tulko, who was frolicking around in the surf along the shore just a few feet from Vini. “But this probably isn’t exactly what I am looking for,” she added, placing the bottle into her backpack. “It doesn’t take a key to open it, and I’m pretty sure I’m looking for something that needs the key we found in the clock in Italy.”

As if perfectly understanding his mistress, Tulko tossed his head in nod several times.

With no houses along the beach, Vini wondered what she was supposed to do next. Again strolling along, confident that God would lead her, at only about a hundred yards from where she had found the bottle, she came across a scrolling trail of sand dollars, about ten inches apart each, leading away from the beach. Even more excited than when she had found the bottle, Vini followed the trail up a gentle slope and straight into a hilly lush green field that was chock full of dandelions over half of which were in bloom, with a handful of those already having gone to seed. Tulko, who had been playing in the foamy waves along the shoreline, had followed Vini up the trail. In remembering what had happened in the valley on their return from Italy, he wanted to stay close and watchful.

The bright yellow blossoms and greenery of the dandelions contrasted beautifully with the gold of the sand and beach grasses fringing the field, making the flowers look like jewels glittering in a setting of soft gold.

Though the trail of sand dollars had ended, Vini continued to follow a sandy path through the grasses around the edge of the field. Glancing behind her, Vini discovered Tulko was still following closely and keeping fairly low to the ground. Though his feet didn’t actually touch the path as he slowly walked behind her (his movements looking much

like he might be gently swimming through the air), little puffs of air from his hooves were leaving marks in the sand that resembled the types of slithering push marks a reptile might leave when traveling through the desert.

When the path suddenly veered into the field and behind one of the larger bluffs, she discovered the sloped entrance to an underground stone tunnel built into the hill. The tunnel was open, at least on this end, without a door or anything else to close off the entrance.

While Vini investigated, Tulko rolled in the dandelions, without actually touching or smashing them because he was rolling in the air; and his movements sent billowing waves over the flowers, as though soft winds were kicking up in small gusts to create the ripples.

Descending the slope and entering the tunnel, which curved slightly, Vini could just see a patch of daylight at the other end of the structure, which she guessed was probably about two hundred feet long. The television program she had watched about cheese making mentioned that the temperature and humidity conditions inside many tunnels were just right for this process. Since this tunnel was currently completely empty, Vini was unable to tell if it had ever been used for cheese making, and she guessed it might simply have been used for storage of some sort, unless it was a fallout shelter. And though it looked structurally safe, she could tell by the weathering of the stones and mortar, along with a few cracks and crumbles, that the tunnel was fairly old.

Only a few feet in, a particular stone at about knee level caught her eye because it was sticking out slightly from the otherwise fairly smooth wall. Several dandelion seeds were caught on the edge that was sticking out. Grasping the heavy stone firmly with her fingers, and with a lot of muscle and a little jiggling, she was able to work it out of its hole, after which, remembering to bend her knees so as to use her legs and not her back for lifting, she placed it with a mighty heave onto the ground.

Her stomach all aflutter with anticipation, she reached into the hole and withdrew a wooden box, about the size of an ordinary shoe box but a bit wider and flatter.

“This is it,” she breathed, noting a keyhole that looked exactly like it would probably take the small skeleton key she had found in Italy.

She was glad she had brought her backpack because the box just fit into it beside the bottle, though the pack wouldn't have held much more. Again remembering to bend her knees, and with another mighty heave, she placed the stone back into the wall, pushing hard and jiggling it to get it back into its original spot.

Though she had brought the key with her, she decided not to spend time opening the box because she suddenly had an odd feeling that she needed to get back to Tulko and get going. In remembering the demon encounter on their last overseas trip, she felt she shouldn't delay their return journey, especially not when her gut was telling her to leave. Though she had her dagger with her, she would rather not risk another run-in with a demon.

Since Tulko was waiting right by the entrance, within seconds, she mounted and they took off. As they departed, in glancing below, Vini could just see a group of people arriving by a small boat on the beach very near where she and Tulko had landed.

"What a lovely gift from God," she told Tulko, in thinking of the box tucked snugly into her backpack, "kind of like a birthday gift."

In firm belief that the contents of the box were the next piece of the puzzle on her quest to find a unicorn, she felt incredibly happy and alive during the eight-minute-or-so flight home to the mansion. Feeling so elated, little could she imagine that any danger might be waiting for her on the rooftop.

Chapter Nineteen

The Storm Before the Calm

As a result of being surprised by the chimney demon, and from the initial melee that followed, Vini lay unconscious on the roof of the mansion for nearly fifteen minutes, during which time the battle between good and evil raged both inside and outside of Mrs. Doyle's home.

With driving rain drenching the roof, making it extremely slippery, the rabbit, hippo, and kittens were all forced to retreat to the attic for shelter, followed by Pizzo who, being so small, thought he might actually drown if out in the downpour much longer.

The demons weren't faring much better, forced to fight in the rainy and windy mess they themselves had created. Not only were they slipping around like everyone else, most of them couldn't safely take flight due to the rain heavily pelting their wings.

The flying topiaries were not too affected, but were having a difficult time seeing, particularly because the rain hitting Beme was turning into thick clouds of steam. In recognizing the lack of visibility on the roof as being particularly dangerous for Sam and Vini, Beme ended up shrinking himself to a smaller size in order to cool down slightly. Thankfully, the rain and wind didn't bother Tulko and Dara, who were still doing their best to protect Vini.

Below in the garden, Preston had made it to the back porch, but in something of a state of shock, not so much from having endured the storm, but more from seeing the fighting ground topiaries, the talking tree, and the sopping-wet Sugar Bear battling an array of demons. Scooting quickly inside the house, he was forced to pause for a few moments in the kitchen to catch his breath.

Violet ordinarily didn't work on Saturdays, but she was working today because she was catching up on laundry and a few other things, having taken a couple of days off during the week to have some dental work done. She had been in the basement folding clothes when she

heard something of a racket upstairs, sounding as though it was coming from the general direction of the library. Rushing up the stairs, she nearly collided with Preston who was racing into the hall from the dining room. Mrs. Doyle was swiftly descending the stairs carrying two swords that she had hurriedly yanked from their hangers on the walls of the library.

After dispatching the first demon with the headman's axe, in recognizing that more danger was probably on the way, she had briefly hidden in a closet of the library, until, that is, her hiding place was discovered by the second demon that had entered the house via the turret window. This particular demon wasn't quite as careless as the one whose head was lopped; indeed, he had grabbed two daggers from the wall immediately upon entering the library, before beginning to search under tables, behind cabinets, and other places for the human he could tell was nearby because he had an excellent nose for sniffing out people in hiding. However, when he opened the closet door, Mrs. Doyle, though unable to swing the axe she still held in such a closed space, was able to butt the demon in the stomach with the head of it, which caused him to teeter backwards and trip over a chair. Losing her grip on the heavy axe, Mrs. Doyle opted to discard it in exchange for the two swords before fleeing the library.

Upon reaching the first floor and handing one of the swords to Preston, she swiftly ushered all three of them into the music room, intent on locking the door behind them and bracing it with chairs, the piano, whatever. Inside the room, Violet quickly retrieved a fireplace poker, and a broom that she had previously propped against the wall. She looked funny wielding both of them. But, of course, there was nothing at all funny about this situation. Indeed, the demon from the library was already on his way downstairs, and heading for the music room. Having followed closely as Mrs. Doyle fled the library, he had seen where she and her companions had retreated to.

Mr. Van Smelt was still unconscious in the parlor. But Mrs. Doyle couldn't stop to consider protecting him at this time; she just had to hope that he would be okay.

Unfortunately, the lock to the music room didn't hold as the demon crashed into the door, and neither did the chair that Mrs. Doyle had propped under the handle. But as the chair skittered across the floor

with the demon's entry, Violet (a former pro softball player) was able to give the beast an enormously hearty whack with the fireplace poker, which caused him to drop the daggers he was holding. The whack also set him off balance so that Preston could get in a hefty sword swipe to the middle of his back that served to knock the nasty creature flat on his face. In knowing that she had an even better weapon than a sword handy, Mrs. Doyle grabbed the ornate metal cross from the wall and quickly knelt to stab the demon with it in the shoulder, which dissipated him instantly.

Yuck and crud! Mrs. Doyle thought, because the disgusting residue this one left was definitely going to ruin the rug.

"Let's get back to the library!" Mrs. Doyle told Preston and Violet, as she was intent on obtaining more weapons and trying to help with whatever was happening on the roof.

However, a nasty surprise met them in the library, in the form of two more demons, one of which, standing very close to the main door, managed to knock the fire poker from Violet's hand as she entered. Undaunted and still in possession of the broom, she immediately broke the handle over a nearby sturdy chair and used the newly-splintered lance to skewer the demon. Though not an injury from ancient metal, the stab was very effective because it allowed Preston the time to set up with his heavy sword and deliver a fatal blow to the neck of the creature, a somewhat difficult task considering the demon was nearly eight feet tall. But in being stabbed by the broom handle first, he had been slightly bent over. As he fell and dissipated, the demon gave off a slight hissing and whistling sound similar to that of air escaping from a deflating balloon.

Mrs. Doyle was trying to deal with the other demon by advancing on him with both sword and cross. Unfortunately, being slightly winded from all of the unexpected exertion of fighting and running down and back up the stairs, she was finding it difficult to muster enough strength.

However, a gusty energy burst from the evil creature that knocked nearly fifty books from a shelf, tearing pages and covers from several of them, was all that it took for Mrs. Doyle to get her second wind. "How dare you damage my books!" she shouted, waving the cross in the face

of the demon who reeled backwards from the proximity and the horror of the dreaded object.

Fortunately for Mrs. Doyle, she was about to get a little help in dealing with the book-damager. Beme, no longer able to do much good on the roof, had been ordered by Sam to descend to help the topiaries on the ground. In passing the library balcony on his way down, he had seen the disturbance inside.

Noticing the firebird hovering outside of the open French doors, and fearful that he would enter and burn up all of her books, Mrs. Doyle yelled, "Wait! Wait!"

With Preston helping, Mrs. Doyle and Violet (who had obtained a metal spear from the wall) herded the demon out onto the balcony where Beme was able to dispatch him with a fireball about the size of a basketball. A chair on the balcony caught fire; but since it was raining so heavily outside, Mrs. Doyle simply used her sword to push it farther out where the rain swiftly extinguished it.

Mrs. Doyle next locked the rear door that the demons had come in by. Thankfully, it had a much stronger lock than the music room door.

Descending to the garden, Beme discovered that many of the demons on the ground had been completely flattened, mainly by the anteater and gorilla, the best of all topiaries it seemed at body slamming and stomping, the tiger being more effective at ripping and shredding. A few of the demons escaping from the slamming, stomping, ripping, and shredding had already limped off, away from the mansion and clear of the worst of the storm so that they could take flight to flee.

Back on the roof, the chimney demon was still there, and was still extremely angry. Tulko, Dara, and Sam were still protecting Vini who was relatively safe because there were fewer demons now. In truth, before the rabbit had been forced to retreat, he had whittled the numbers on the roof down to six. With two of the creatures entering the house to make their way down to the library, that left only four on the roof.

While the rain was a hindrance, it was actually what roused Vini, who, upon regaining consciousness, was able to find and retrieve her dagger and the copper lance that were both still close by. Though slightly dizzy, she felt okay otherwise, and was able to move everything of her body, at least well enough to stand up and inch her way closer to Sam who was fighting the chimney demon while Tulko and Dara held

off the other three. Having obtained the valley metal club, the chimney demon was striking viciously at Sam, who was warding off the blows with a tree branch dropped by one of the other demons.

With the rain still coming down hard, and her feet slipping, fearing for their safety, Vini prayed for the storm to calm; and right away, the rain eased, considerably.

Wow, that's sure a quick answer to a prayer, she thought, not having noticed yet that a new helper had arrived, in the form of Charlie, astride Lyydu who was already starting to push back the storm. But Vini couldn't help but notice the thunderbird when he swooped in to knock the chimney demon clean off the roof.

Tulko and Dara had managed to route the other three demons closer to the roof edge, which enabled the butterfly, owl, and hummingbird topiaries to dive in and topple two of the nasty creatures into the garden. The rabbit, who had been peeking out of the trap door to the attic, charged out next to knock the last demon from the roof.

The final four that had fallen to the ground landed on the opposite side of the house to the location of most of the topiaries. So with the exception of the camel delivering several swift kicks to one, and Sugar Bear smacking another with his bucket, the nasty creatures remained relatively unharmed and able to flee, taking flight because the storm had eased enough for them to safely do so.

Lyydu cleared the remainder of the storm with one clap of his mighty wings that was so loud, and could be felt so deeply as an earth tremor, people within a ten-mile radius thought they had experienced a small earthquake. Lyydu ended up taking Charlie home right away because her father, due home from bidding a job at any moment, didn't know she was gone and likely would have worried if he returned and found her missing. In noting that Sam and Vini on the roof looked relatively unharmed, Charlie simply waved to them; after which, she and Lyydu instantly disappeared from view, leaving only a small rumble felt in stomachs as evidence of their departure.

A couple of minutes later, as things in the garden seemed well under the control of the topiaries and the firebird, Sugar Bear abandoned his bucket before proceeding to make his way home. Though he might have liked to have stayed for a bit longer, he didn't want to worry his humans in being gone too long.

From the rooftop, Pizzo was whistling and squeaking to the butterfly, who then spread the word for all of the topiaries to return to home. An hour later, inspecting his garden for damage from the storm, Mr. Galloway would have no idea the adventure many of his bushes had just been on. Except for having lost a few leaves and small branches, they all looked perfectly normal.

Inside, Mrs. Doyle was coming down the stairs to greet Mr. Van Smelt in the parlor, who had awoken with the clap of thunder but who was slightly disoriented. The sweep left somewhat bewildered, but fully paid for unjamming the chimney, about ten minutes later.

Under Pizzo's direction, the kittens, hippo, talking tree, and rabbit were all settled back into their paintings fairly quickly.

Sam led the stiff and sore Vini, whose head still hurt, to the attic trap door (since it would be safer than trying to climb down the fire ladder), and stayed beside her as she descended the stairs to meet up with Violet, Preston, and Mrs. Doyle in the parlor.

Fearing a possible serious head injury, Mrs. Doyle would be taking Vini to see a doctor right away. Preston would accompany them and Mrs. Doyle would take both of them home afterwards to explain things to their parents. Before leaving, Vini hugged Sam who would be staying with Violet to help with cleaning up until Mrs. Doyle got back. Dara would maintain watch in the skies above the mansion for the rest of the day because her brother, naturally, would be closely following Vini's movements.

Buckling up in the car, both Preston and Vini found themselves extremely hungry, which Mrs. Doyle had anticipated and prepared for, in the form of energy bars and apples she had grabbed from the kitchen on their way out, which were hungrily consumed on the drive to the Minor Emergency Clinic.

After filling out the initial paperwork and while they were waiting to see the doctor, since they were well away from other people in the waiting area, Vini and Mrs. Doyle talked to Preston about what had happened.

"Well, I already figured out awhile back there were magical things going on at your house," he said to Mrs. Doyle. "That floating ball of fire I see hanging around Sam sometimes, for one. I guess that's one of the firebirds you just told me about." As Mrs. Doyle was nodding, he

added to Vini, “And I already figured out not to tell anyone, like our parents, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Smiling, Vini answered, “At least not right now, but maybe sometime in the future, if it seems right.”

“You know,” Preston responded, “I’d rather be a regular hero with supernatural help from God than a superhero from a comic book. And...well...I sort of have something to confess. I get messages from the bible sometimes, just flipping through; and these words just kind of jump out at me. That’s how I know sometimes what I am supposed to do.”

Vini almost couldn’t believe what she was hearing because this was exactly how God spoke to her much of the time, to reassure her, guide her, and tell her what to do.

“And that’s how I knew to start training with the sword and the bow,” he added. “Just before Sam said he’d help me learn archery, God told me in a Psalm that He’s training me for war, so that I can ‘bend a bow of bronze’ I think.”

“But I thought that quote was in Second Samuel,” Vini said.

“It’s in two places in the bible,” Mrs. Doyle said, “Psalm 18 and Second Samuel.”

Again, Vini almost couldn’t believe that God had given Preston the same message He had given her. Of course, it had meant something slightly different to Preston, that he needed to start training; whereas, Vini took it as God reassuring her and giving her courage and confidence. Messages in God’s Word could often have very different meanings for different individuals, especially given each person’s unique life circumstances.

As astounding as all of this was to Vini, she was even more surprised by what Preston said next, somewhat sheepishly. “I kind of have another confession to make. God has given me a special gift, like a magical helper. I was leaving the mansion garden one day when this walking stick just dropped out of a tree and onto my shoulder. I had never seen one like it before, all colorful, so I knew it was special. It stayed on my shoulder all the way home. And it hangs out with me a lot. And I think it maybe can become invisible at times because I can look and it’s not there, but then it is there just a second later. I think it might be a girl, but I’m not sure. Maybe because her name is Eleta, and

it sounds like more of a girl's name. And I don't know how I know her name. It just came to me in my head, just after she dropped onto my shoulder that day."

"Is she red and blue with little yellow splotches kind of streaked and swirled on her back?" Mrs. Doyle asked.

"Yes," he answered, nodding emphatically and earnestly, hardly able to believe that Mrs. Doyle could know anything about his new friend.

"Then she's a vritsee, not a walking stick," Mrs. Doyle answered. "And a vritsee is like a smooth version of an umpqualla, without the fuzziness and fluff."

"No fuzziness and fluff," Preston confirmed. "And Eleta can fly; I forgot to mention that. She has these tiny wings, but they are folded against her body so you don't see them unless she takes off."

"Definitely a vritzee then," Mrs. Doyle said. "Umpquallas don't fly; though they do like to collect feathers, but they usually pick them up off of the ground."

"Eleta sometimes hides under my collar," Preston went on, "if I'm wearing a shirt with a collar. Sometimes she's just nearby, like in the bushes or in a tree. And she guides me in archery and sword training, like I can almost hear her thoughts in my head, giving me pointers or telling me to move a certain way. She gives me information by just nodding or shaking her head sometimes too," he added. "Like if I don't understand something in the bible, and I have a question, she can usually answer it with a nod or a shake."

Vini was smiling in hearing her brother's words because they reminded her of some of her own experiences with Tulko.

"But I can't figure out what she eats," he said. "She doesn't seem to want anything that I offer her."

In this detail, Vini could enlighten her brother. "Magical creatures feed on the goodness in human beings. So there will be more of them in the future if more people turn to good. We can't have as many of them right now because they wouldn't have enough to eat."

"You've gotten quite a good long ways in your research, I see," Mrs. Doyle said, smiling.

“But...wait...” Vini said, suddenly thinking of something. “Feeding on goodness isn’t always true because Pizzo eats food just like we do.”

Here, Mrs. Doyle could enlighten Vini. “Oh he doesn’t have to eat people food. He chooses to.” This was true, as Pizzo, while he didn’t need to eat people food, simply couldn’t see the point in not doing so because so many of the things people ate were extremely yummy. Plus, he did so much running around, the extra energy boost from the food was definitely a help to him. “And there’s one other thing you should know about what magical creatures eat,” Mrs. Doyle added. “While good magical creatures feed on goodness, the ones on the side of evil feed on the evil in human beings.”

“With the world so full of evil these days, the bad ones probably have plenty to eat,” Preston said, somewhat sadly. “That’s probably why there are so many of them.”

As it was Vini’s turn to see a doctor, their conversation ended here.

The doctor was simply told that Vini suffered two blows to the head that briefly knocked her unconscious when an odd storm blew up, the first blow from a tree branch knocking her into a stone wall where she hit the other side of her head. Since this was all true, and because her other minor scrapes and bumps were consistent with what Vini and Mrs. Doyle described, the doctor never questioned the story. Thankfully, he couldn’t particularly find anything wrong with her. A scan was ordered and taken that would eventually confirm what the doctor suspected—that there was nothing hidden that might cause later problems.

Other than a slight headache, she wasn’t experiencing any symptoms that might indicate a concussion; but she was told what to look for, particularly memory loss and confusion, which, if either of these developed, she was to seek medical help immediately.

When cleared to leave, Mrs. Doyle immediately took Preston and Vini home where she explained about the freak storm and the visit to the doctor. “I didn’t want to worry or panic you unless there was something to worry or panic about,” Mrs. Doyle said. “That’s why I didn’t call from the clinic. She seemed okay, so I just used my own judgment.”

“I think you were right,” Mrs. Aberdeen said. “I would have panicked unnecessarily.”

Mrs. Doyle also informed Vini's parents that if any medical expenses were not completely covered by their insurance, to be sure to let her know. Since Vini was at work when this happened, Mrs. Doyle wanted to make sure that she took care of the entire cost.

"That's not necessary," her father replied, "but it's nice that you're offering, in case it turns out to be a lot." In being pretty familiar with their insurance, he felt they were probably going to be okay on the cost.

Shortly before dinner, Preston invited Vini to his room so that she could meet Eleta, a completely sweet little creature that was exactly as Preston had described, like a colorful walking stick, just about the right size to hide under the collar of his shirt.

Vini was so proud of Preston for the way he had handled himself during the battle at the mansion. And she suddenly realized something pretty surprising—that her loud and sometimes annoying little brother suddenly didn't seem so loud and annoying anymore. Instead, he was a pretty great person, and a good friend.

"Eleta's really tough," Preston said. "One time she was sitting on a shelf in the basement and watching me spar when Mom brought down a box of old clothes and set it right on top of her. I nearly freaked. But she was fine. When I lifted up the box, she just walked out from under it."

As they watched Eleta swinging from pencils and pens in the cup holder on his desk, and playing with a paperclip dangling from one of her feet, Preston told Vini, "I wanted to tell you about her because I feel like I can talk to you. But I was afraid you might be jealous because I was given this special gift."

"You *can* talk to me," Vini replied, "about anything, any time."

She then confessed about Tulko to Preston. "And I was afraid to tell you because I thought you might be jealous," she said.

"A wind horse," he breathed, in wonder. "I've never heard of such a thing. Not even in comic books."

"I hadn't either," Vini answered.

With their mother doing laundry, and their father taking a nap, having fallen asleep on the couch while watching TV, Vini took Preston out to the back yard to meet Tulko, who was again mad at himself for not recognizing the danger upon bringing Vini back from Japan and was

therefore determined to stay close to her, at least for the rest of the weekend.

Preston was speechless at first. But a couple of minutes later, after having soaked in the sight, while stroking Tulko's neck, he said, "Wow!"

Smiling, Vini responded, "I know, pretty neat, huh?"

"Pretty amazing," Preston agreed, though he did quickly add, "but I wouldn't trade Eleta for anything."

"Of course not," Vini replied. A few moments later, she added, "We'll go for a ride sometime. Tulko just told me he wouldn't mind. He talks to me sometimes the way your new friend talks to you."

"Can Eleta come too?" Preston asked.

With a smile, Vini answered, "Tulko just said, 'Yes.'"

Just after dinner, while reading in her room, Vini started thinking about how both she and Preston were getting directions and answers from the bible, and this led her to wondering if this was the way everyone could and should get answers, especially to important questions. She'd always heard that the bible is a book of guidance and answers. Maybe God speaks to everyone who reads the bible this way, but possibly some people don't notice. In the same way that Vini didn't always notice important things, but was trying to get better about paying attention to what was going on around her, perhaps other people might benefit from doing the same thing.

Sam had retrieved Vini's backpack from the roof before going home, and Mrs. Doyle ended up bringing it over to her in the evening. Though the pack was still wet, the box inside, though damp, seemed unharmed. He had retrieved the bottle too, which, amazingly enough, was unbroken. And Sam had carefully wiped it off, so that it bore no nasty residue from being stuck in the chimney demon's head.

In her bedroom, Vini put the bottle aside, for the moment, because she was much more interested in the box, which, oddly enough, she had briefly forgotten about, with the distraction of visiting the doctor and in the excitement of first meeting Eleta.

Retrieving the key from the clock in Italy from her pack, she plopped down on her bed with the box, slightly nervous but also very confident as she fitted the skeleton key to the lock.

Sure enough, the key fit, and with a tiny metallic snapping sound, the box was unlocked. Holding her breath as she raised the lid, Vini was very surprised to find a bible inside, simply wrapped in a soft terrycloth towel.

This was very confusing. Although she couldn't have known what she might find inside the box, this was something she never would have expected.

Carefully unwrapping the book and setting the towel aside, she murmured thoughtfully, "A bible...old...but not extremely old...a *Revised Standard Version*." This was the same version of the bible Vini had, though the one from the box had a slightly different cover.

Though this was a pretty wonderful find, Vini couldn't imagine what it might have to do with her search for a unicorn.

Chapter Twenty

Whispers and Doubles

With going to church on Sunday, and being stiff and sore and needing to rest, Vini didn't have a chance to examine the bible more closely by the time Monday rolled around. And she likely wouldn't have a chance today because she wanted to get to work early, not only to keep her promise to Pizzo about mending his trousers, but also because she was scheduled to work full days at least through Wednesday during the week of spring break because Violet was having more dental work done and needed a lot of time off to recover.

Charlie was visiting the mansion on Monday, Mrs. Doyle having asked her to come over to bake cookies, to cheer everyone up with the wonderful smells, and as a treat to eat, of course. She was baking three recipes in double batches because Mrs. Doyle wanted to have plenty of extras to take to a couple of friends in a nursing care facility.

When Vini arrived, Mrs. Doyle was already on the telephone arranging for roof repairs, and Charlie was already in the middle of her second double batch of cookies.

"Did you get here at midnight?" Vini asked Charlie, who was pouring Vini a tall glass of milk to go with the still-warm white chocolate macadamia nut cookies on the plate she had just handed her friend. "I'm taking these to the music room, if Mrs. Doyle doesn't mind," Vini added, indicating the glass and plate, "so I can get started fixing Pizzo's pants."

Mrs. Doyle smiled, nodded, and waved her approval, unable to answer aloud because she was listening to something the other party on the phone was telling her.

As she grabbed a napkin, Vini told Charlie, "It was almost hard to believe Pizzo was so willing to help, with Louetta not being around. But he probably dislikes demons worse than he dislikes non-artistic people. Anyway, I want to make sure I fix his trousers first thing."

From a box in the sewing room, Vini had chosen some pretty red thread that was as close of a match to the original stitching of the pants as she could find. Pizzo had put on his old tattered trousers for this process and was sitting on the lamp table beside Vini's chair eyeing her like an eagle as she worked, while also wolfing down chunks from a cookie Charlie had brought to him.

While listening for the oven timer, Charlie came in again at one point to describe to Vini how Lydu, evidently realizing that something was wrong at the mansion on Saturday, had come to get her. "I could feel that he was in the back yard; and when I went out and wouldn't get on him, he grabbed my sleeve and the side of my jacket, and basically yanked me and flipped me up onto his back. He tore my jacket sleeve."

"You do know that if you ever fall, he'll catch you," Vini said. "He's fast enough to catch you."

"I know, but I still don't like flying," Charlie whined. "But I'm glad we came."

"Me too," Vini said. "We needed every bit of help that came. And please thank Lydu for clearing the storm. That was such a relief."

As the oven timer went off and Charlie flew back to the kitchen, Vini handed Pizzo his freshly-mended pants.

Upon examining them closely, and finding her work to be satisfactory, he accidentally smiled, after which, in slight nervous confusion, he turned bright red. He then stuck his tongue out at her before sliding down the leg of the lamp table and scurrying off.

Vini had brought the corked bottle with her. In removing it from her backpack, she noticed a small tear in the lining of the pack made from the sharp embellished top of the library key. Likely from the tussle on the roof, the tear wasn't too large; but since she had sewing supplies already out and handy, Vini quickly stitched up the rip. The key looked undamaged, thankfully.

Mrs. Doyle had said she would help open the bottle, since corks could sometimes be tricky. Placing the bottle on a towel on the desk in the butler's pantry, and using a small knife, Mrs. Doyle carefully removed as much of the wax as she could around the spot where the cork and bottle met, at which point, she was able to loosen the cork with a large pair of pliers. With both Vini and Charlie looking on, she then gave a firm tug, which successfully popped the cork. As it came out of

the bottle, in addition to the normal sound of a cork popping, the bottle gave off an odd whisper, almost like wind whistling through a small gap in a window frame on a windy day, but lasting only for a couple of seconds.

Mrs. Doyle then handed the bottle and a pair of needle-nose pliers to Vini, who held her breath as she reached in with the pliers to carefully retrieve the rolled-up paper that ended up being a large sheet of thick cream-colored stationery with pretty scalloped edges upon which nothing at all was written, not even one word.

“How odd,” Vini said, peering at the paper more closely in the hopes of finding faded letters or a drawing, or at least something. Yet, even from the scrutiny of only an inch or two away, the paper still revealed nothing, not even a watermark.

“Maybe it’s written in invisible ink,” Charlie suggested hopefully, while Vini flattened out the paper as much as possible on the surface of the desk.

Under Mrs. Doyle’s instruction, Vini lit a candle, over which she carefully held the paper, not close enough to burn but near enough for the paper to become warm.

“Let’s try a little lemon juice next,” Mrs. Doyle suggested.

Charlie retrieved a lemon from the kitchen, slicing it on a plate and squeezing it slightly, so that Vini could rub juice on a small section of the paper, both sides. When nothing was revealed, she then held the spot with lemon juice over the candle. Again, this revealed nothing.

As no one had any other good ideas about the blank paper at this time, Vini carefully wiped the lemon juice from the stationery with a damp corner of a hand towel that Charlie brought her. Leaving the paper spread out on the towel, she would wait for it to dry completely before stowing it back into the corked bottle for safekeeping, until perhaps she had more ideas as to what she might do with it.

“This is certainly a mystery,” Vini said. “I can’t imagine why someone would put a blank piece of paper into a bottle like this.”

“Maybe just to make the finder wonder why,” the ever-practical Charlie nonchalantly replied. Not only was she not particularly interested in this type of mystery, she was immensely interested, at the moment, in getting back to finishing up the last batch of cookies.

Another mystery waiting to be solved, Vini thought a short while later, while helping Mrs. Doyle to straighten things up in the library. Strangely enough, finding a mystery felt almost as exciting as finding an answer to one. It was another challenge. And life, after all, was basically a succession of challenges waiting to be worked through, experienced, conquered, whatever.

After a wonderful lunch prepared by Charlie of turkey Waldorf salad, topped off by more cookies and milk, Vini discovered that Charlie had been invited to the mansion for another reason besides baking and staying for lunch. Another mystery was about to be solved, but one that Vini hadn't even realized was a mystery. And while the events of Saturday had been a shock, Vini was in for another shock, in some ways even greater than what had happened on the rooftop.

She was just setting down her milk glass and wiping her mouth with a napkin when Sam walked into the kitchen from the back porch. Then, a mere second later, Sam walked in again!

There were two of them! Sam was twins! Or was a twin! Whatever! This was almost unbelievable!

Except that it was believable, as Vini would come to realize upon reviewing in her mind all of the events that had happened since she first met Sam, many of which contained clues pointing to exactly this—that Sam was two people!

Of course he was! And it all suddenly made sense in her mind, about how he seemed so different around Louetta sometimes, and about the magic trick. So that's how he, or rather they, did it. Cuts and scrapes healing more slowly now also made sense, and Vini cringed in imagining someone having to give himself a cut to match his secret twin. She also realized that Sam on the bicycle that day on the side street was probably actually his brother. And maybe even that lanky kid with messy blond hair—that might have been one of them. If they were something like magicians, Vini certainly believed them capable of disguises. She would later find out that this was the case because, when both twins needed to be out at the same time, one of them generally was disguised. They also did have identical bicycles.

As incredible as this was, it seemed Vini was pretty much the only person who didn't know. Mrs. Doyle, Charlie, Albert, and Louetta had all known for quite some time. "Am I just daft?" Vini asked.

“Violet didn’t know either until yesterday,” Mrs. Doyle answered.

“But she hasn’t spent as much time around Sam as I have,” Vini replied, shaking her head, still unable to believe that she hadn’t noticed something that now seemed perfectly obvious. “Oh, but Preston probably doesn’t know,” she added, “unless he does and he’s just not telling.”

“Oh he knows,” the first Sam that had walked in replied. “He hasn’t come right out and said it, but he’s dropped hints, like a few times talking about twins and mentioning something about seeing double. One time, he called those farthest mushroom topiaries ‘two peas in a pod’ very deliberately. And I know he thinks Ben is a better archery coach.”

“Ben, so that’s your name,” Vini said to the second Sam. And she almost felt like she was meeting him for the first time, except that she knew she wasn’t, of course.

“We both have the same name, Samuel Benjamin Israel.” Sam replied. “We’ve been protected since just after birth, when our mother got a message from God that we were in danger from two demons that were hunting us.”

“We’re evidently supposed to do something great to combat evil during our lives.” Ben continued, adding to his brother’s story. “We haven’t figured out quite what yet, other than helping you.”

“Our father had already been killed by one of the demons,” Sam went on. “Our mother was killed too shortly after we were born. So our grandparents found a way to hide us in another state. Our uncle isn’t really our uncle, but one of our mother’s childhood friends. We were hidden here as one, instead of two, because the demons are probably searching for two people.”

“We have two birth certificates,” Ben added, “but we need to continue to put on as being one person until the demons are no longer after us. We really do both have the same name. There’s no law that says you can’t give all of your kids the same name. I go by Ben and he goes by Sam. In this case, being twins and having the same name really helped our uncle early on to pretend we were one person when getting legal guardianship of us, and in getting us set up in school. Even now, to keep us safe, he only does official paperwork like registering for

school, church programs, or whatever once, as though we really are only one person.”

“We each go to school half time, then share information to keep up,” Sam interjected. “But for school and other purposes, we’re registered under our uncle’s last name, Dellinger, which is right since he basically is our father now. He just never officially adopted us.”

“Why not?” Charlie asked.

“Well, legal adoption costs money,” Sam answered. “Plus, which one of us would he have adopted? Then the other one might have felt left out. When we were little, we didn’t really understand these things as well. And our lives were complicated enough having to pretend to be one person, even as toddlers.”

“Unfortunately,” Ben said, “the demons that are after us might know where we are now, since we’ve had some encounters lately. We’ll need to stay on our guard. Of course, we have the firebirds.”

“As protectors,” Vini said, “just like Tulko protects me. And Lyydu protects Charlie. She’s probably going to do something fabulous to combat evil someday too.”

“Like kill bad guys with good food,” Ben said, his mouth full of his third cookie. “Best cookies I’ve ever had.”

“I guess I could smash a demon with a rolling pin,” Charlie joked.

“Or put one through a meat grinder,” Mrs. Doyle added.

“Mr. Corrigan knows about us too,” Sam said, laughing a little. “We messed up at first.”

“That’s right,” Ben added, “we did too much work the first couple of weeks here at the mansion. Mr. Corrigan said it would be impossible even for Hercules to do that much work in such a short period of time. So we fessed up.”

“And told him why we needed to pretend to be one person,” Sam said, “and he understood.”

Though Sam and Ben were identical twins, the small scar on Sam’s face from the demon encounter in Odd Town was slightly shorter than the scar on Ben’s face. With the twins side by side, Vini also noticed that Ben was slightly thinner than his brother. A small patch of hair on the left side of his head, just above his left eyebrow, was also a tad lighter. But, of course, if people were to meet each twin individually, they likely wouldn’t notice any of these, or other, differences. Vini was

living proof of this as she hadn't known they were two people until just today, and only knew now because they had decided to tell her. Even with all of the twin ideas that had passed through her mind over the last several months, such as seeing two of Sam through the beveled glass and thinking about Tami and Sami so often when around Ben or Sam, she still hadn't a clue. Thinking of this and chastising herself for not paying better attention, Vini again admired her little brother, who was obviously much more observant than she. But, then, he actually spent more time with Ben and Sam than she did, and the time spent was often in closer proximity. In wondering where her powers of discernment had been this whole time, she realized they had been working just fine; she just hadn't placed enough importance on the clues or odd feelings she was getting, or on piecing them together to come up with an answer as to what had puzzled her about Sam.

"As far as our secrets, we don't usually say this stuff out loud," Sam stated, "because Satan and his followers might overhear. That's why it's not always good to pray aloud or make plans out loud. Satan can overhear. But he can't read people's minds like God can."

With this, Vini suddenly realized she had been careless in that regard several times, and would need to be more careful about saying things aloud in the future.

"That's why I brought this to the kitchen for lunch and our discussion," Mrs. Doyle said, showing Vini a wooden cross she had been holding in her lap. "A cross can sometimes keep evil creatures like demons at enough of a distance so that a conversation won't be overheard. But I think we're safe today anyway because they took quite a thrashing on Saturday. The ones that survived are probably off licking their wounds, and will be too afraid to come back anytime soon."

In the late afternoon, still reeling a bit from everything that had happened lately, and especially from this new revelation, Vini strolled about the garden. Charlie had gone home already, as well as Sam. Ben had stayed because there was still a good amount of clean-up to do. Currently, he was burning a pile of cedar shakes and tree limbs that he and Mrs. Doyle were finding strewn about the gardens.

Vini's stomach felt a little weird, if not unsettled by recent events, then probably just way too full of cookies. As she was heading back into the house, Mrs. Doyle called her over to look at a couple of

hawthorn bushes, sitting either side of the stepping stone path very near the house. “Look at how the branch configuration is nearly identical,” Mrs. Doyle marveled. “They’re almost like twins.” Indeed, these particular hawthorns were as close to being twins as any two bushes ever could be. Not only were the trunks and main branches nearly identical, many of the clusters of smaller leaves and twigs looked similar, though the similarities were in mirror image, almost as though they were reflecting one another in imitation across the path.

“I just don’t seem to notice things like this the way you do,” Vini said, rather dejectedly.

“Well, I didn’t notice until just today,” Mrs. Doyle answered. “Plus, noticing takes practice, and I’m older than you are. So of course I notice more things than you do.”

“But I never noticed that Sam and Ben were different people,” Vini said, the dejection in her voice turning to frustration, “just like I never noticed the demon on the roof until it was too late, until Tulko had already gone. If I had noticed, we might have avoided all of this mess, and your roof might not be all messed up.”

“You can’t blame yourself because none of this was your fault,” Mrs. Doyle said emphatically, indicating the remaining debris surrounding them. “I never noticed the demon up the chimney, and I live here! If anything, it’s my fault. But I’m not going to beat myself up over it. What’s done is done. Now, we just have to move on.”

“But there’s a demon after me, just like the ones after the twins,” Vini confessed. “It’s not the one that was up your chimney. But still, I feel like I’ve brought evil to you and your house.”

“I have felt chills in the parlor for at least a couple of years,” Mrs. Doyle answered, “and that’s way longer than you’ve worked here. And as far as bringing evil, I could tell you some stories about my travels, with my husband especially, and with his collecting of religious artifacts. Evil probably followed us home many times. But God has always protected us, just like He’s protecting you. I know what happened on the roof and in that Odd Town was upsetting, but you survived.”

Sensing that Vini was somewhat afraid, as well as feeling guilt and frustration, and whatever else might be adding to her mix of strong emotions, Mrs. Doyle added, “Think of the twins. With two demons

after them, it's amazing they've survived for all of these years. I'm sure God is protecting them. And He'll protect you too. He looks after His children. With Him on our side, we really have nothing to fear."

Ben was nearby and had overheard the last several of Mrs. Doyle's comments. "Whenever I'm afraid," he said, "I write a note to myself on my hand, as a reminder that I belong to God and that He is looking out for me and keeping me safe." Pulling a pen out of his back pocket, he wrote two words on his hand before then showing them to Vini.

"The LORD's," she read from his palm.

"Then I look at it throughout the day," he added, "and I'm not so afraid."

"That's why God gave me Tulko," Vini said, "so I won't be so afraid."

"I imagine He's given you a lot of other special things too," Ben said, before heading off to collect more debris for the burn pile.

At home about an hour before dinner, in having a chance to examine the bible she found in Japan more closely, Vini discovered that, although it was the same version as hers, with the same wording, it was slightly older. Vini's bible had been a gift from her grandmother, who owned several bibles and who had given one each to both Preston and Vini. *So mine is 1971, and this one is 1962*, she mused. The one from Japan had a zippered cover with a small metal cross attached to the zipper, while Vini's bible was not zippered and simply flipped open like a regular book. The bookplate page in the front of the zippered book featured a colorful leafy design, while Vini's bible had a much plainer bookplate. Unlike her bible, in which her name was carefully printed, the bookplate page in the older book had been left completely blank, and therefore offered no clues as to who its previous owner might have been.

Starting in about the middle, and turning pages slowly in order to look for anything unusual, she discovered a passage marked in pencil with brackets. Again carefully flipping through, she found another bracketed passage; then, a few pages later, another. Just casually flipping pages, she might not have noticed because the pencil marks didn't stand out like pen would have; plus, some were slightly faded.

In studying the three passages she had found so far, she didn't think they particularly related to one another. But all three were pretty

positive and inspirational. Finding two more, then another, she thought, *If these are supposed to equal a clue or a message, they might take some careful study.* After saying a short prayer to request God's help in understanding, Vini began copying the marked bible passages into her journal. Lately, she had pretty much been recording everything important in the journal and was not using the binder much at all. Since she could always get another journal when this one filled, she didn't see much point in putting the information in two places. However, recently copying many of her binder notes into the journal had proven a good review of all of the information she had collected so far. Plus, her handwriting was improving with the practice.

In starting in the middle of the bible, and in missing a couple along the way because the pencil marks were light, Vini was finding and recording the passages out of order as far as how they were actually listed in the bible. However, she thought this might have been meant to be because, as she was copying them, they seemed to make more sense in the order in which she was writing them down, as a kind of message or perhaps a story.

After dinner, she spent nearly two hours looking carefully at each page in the bible to find all of the marked verses. At the end of the task, she had recorded twelve in total, some long, some short, but all very encouraging and uplifting. Four of them were ones she had already listed in her journal under her "Promises from God" section in the back.

In a quick read-through of them, she thought the twelve might somehow be related to one another other than simply being motivational in nature. But perhaps this was someone simply collecting uplifting sayings relating to God reassuring and comforting His children. *If they tell a story, or give God's direction,* she thought, *I might have to do some more rearranging to figure it out.*

Having a slight headache, she decided to stop reading and simply pray for the half hour or so left before bedtime. In closing her eyes, she heard a faint whispering that sounded as though it was right outside her window. It was similar to what she had heard when Mrs. Doyle opened the bottle, but the whispering outside her window went on for longer, probably twelve or fifteen seconds, at least.

Quickly turning off her lamp and the overhead light, she pulled back the window curtains and peered out. The moon and a distant street

lamp did illuminate the darkened back yard somewhat, but not enough to really see much. In not sensing Tulko's presence, she knew he couldn't have made the odd whistling noise. Convinced Vini was safe for the night, he had departed about an hour after dinner. Plus, he never made mysterious or soft whistling sounds. Whenever he moved, he definitely sounded like the wind, there was no mistaking it; but it was the sort of wind that didn't particularly whistle softly. The strange noise might have sounded slightly like a windy whistle, but it also sounded like faint voices were mixed in, perhaps in the background.

As the puzzle over the whispers sank deeper into her brain, Vini realized that she had notes relating to this from her research. Turning the lights back on and hurriedly flipping pages in her journal, she landed on a note that had something to do with God speaking to us through the whispers of unicorns. It was just a short note that she hadn't elaborated on, and she found herself wishing she had taken better notes. But in flipping pages again, she found exactly what she was looking for, about how unicorns might be found by listening for their movements that sound like whispers.

But is it only their movements that create a kind of whisper, or do they have a whispering voice that carries a message from God? she wondered.

No, they don't have an actual voice because they communicate by thought, she reasoned.

But could I have been hearing a thought and not a real sound? In remembering that the experience of Odd Town had likely been all in her brain, she thought it possible that this might be how some supernatural communication worked, in people being somehow able to hear things not spoken aloud.

If God was speaking to her in this way, through the whispers of passing unicorns, then she should definitely listen. However, at this point, Vini didn't think she had heard enough whispering to make anything firm of it, not outside the window, and not from when the bottle was opened either.

But could a unicorn have just passed by her window? She was pretty sure one hadn't come out of the corked bottle, unless it was tiny and could then change sizes. Since unicorns were connected to God, who was of course capable of making the impossible possible, the idea

didn't seem too farfetched. But if so, she had missed it, just like the one passing by her window, if that was what it was.

Since this was all just a little much to ponder directly before bedtime, at least too much to reach any successful conclusions before falling asleep, she decided to push the issue of unicorn whispers to the back of her mind.

With the remembrance of the faint whispers lulling her into a deep and peaceful sleep, Vini had a somewhat odd and amusing dream featuring unicorns that were acting as something like heavenly telephones, sort of like conduits, so that God could easily communicate with His children on earth. What was odd and amusing was that the unicorns in her dream were all wearing telephone headsets, like those worn by people who were on the phone a lot for their jobs and needed to keep their hands free to type or take notes. The unicorns were also sitting at desks, looking as though they might be ready to answer phones and either jot down notes or enter information into the computers sitting in front of them. As the creatures relayed messages back and forth between God and various people on earth, their voices sounded just like the faint whistling whispers Vini had heard. Later in her dream, Vini found herself once again in the dandelion field she and Tulko had visited, standing very near the entrance to the tunnel. Hearing faint whispering, she looked around and chanced to see a soft but familiar light at the end of the tunnel, which is exactly when she awoke to the soft but familiar light filtering through her window and announcing the sunrise.

Chapter Twenty-One

The End of the Tunnel

It was only on her walk to work that Vini realized that the “light at the end of the tunnel” she had dreamt about coincided with her mother and Sam both having recently used the same cliché. Her mother had used it during a conversation with Preston after church on Sunday, but Vini hadn’t been paying close attention to what exactly they were talking about. However, she had heard Sam’s exact conversation the weekend before her excursion to Japan. He had used the expression about seeing a “light at the end of the tunnel” when talking to Mrs. Doyle about the topiary project. He had finally finished the entire row of mushrooms and was relieved to be getting on to the final two sculptures they had decided upon—a dragonfly and a daisy to be made out of the two largest privets.

In remembering her visit to Japan, Vini realized she might have heard whispers, but had probably dismissed them as the wind coming off of the sea or blowing through the grasses fringing the dandelion field. But in thinking about her dream, and in recalling the light she had seen at the far end of the tunnel, she now thought that it might have been something more than daylight. *Could it have been a unicorn?*

As she was working, her mind was full of the notes from her research. But which ones were correct, or, at least, more correct than others? Relying on her gift of discernment, she definitely believed that unicorns could help people see the good in bad situations. She also believed that they traveled faster than light. However, she had read a slightly different theory once that also rang true—that unicorns actually are light, or are full of light. With light being an incredibly powerful force against evil, this was at least part of the secret behind their strength and goodness.

At the exact moment she thought of this, Vini was cleaning the bedroom mirror in which she had seen the angel, and she smiled. One book Vini had read indicated that unicorns were thought to be like

mirrors that are full of light. The book also said that if we notice a mirror that is dark, it is a warning that something unseen around us is wrong. But although mirrors can appear dark, they don't reflect darkness, only light. Even though the world is definitely dark right now, it's not something that a mirror can reflect. A passage in the bible she had read recently described the darkness of the coming Endtimes. However, believers were not to fear because they wouldn't need a light, because Jesus would be the light, like a lamp to the whole world. But seeing light in a mirror gives us hope, and unicorns are synonymous with hope. *Maybe it was a unicorn I saw in this mirror and not an angel*, she thought. But that didn't sound right. Angel definitely sounded more right than unicorn.

However, as far as the tunnel in Japan, she did think it likely that a unicorn had been, literally, the light at the end of the tunnel.

Should I go back and look?

This didn't sound like a good idea, especially because Vini was fairly certain that a unicorn would not stay in one place for very long.

However, once again, she chided herself for not paying closer attention. She had been so focused on sand dollars and dandelions that she might have missed something important. What if God was placing a unicorn in her path over and over again, but she was missing it? The light at the far end of the tunnel had definitely had a golden glint to it, and a lot of sightings of unicorns described the creatures as being golden. At the time, she couldn't imagine that she might be that close to finding a unicorn because she still thought she had a ways to go.

Again thinking of her research, she remembered that unicorns were thought to be a cure for depression, and she wondered perhaps if the cure might lie in the fact that, after seeing a unicorn, no one could stay depressed for long. But could it be that simple? Somehow Vini didn't think so. Helping a person to see their troubling circumstances in a better light would more likely relieve depressive symptoms. Along these same lines, Vini had read another theory stating that a unicorn's presence could help someone in trouble choose a path to a better situation, thereby acting as a guide.

Reviewing more of her notes in her mind, she recalled that unicorns were sometimes called horned lions because of certain lion-like features. The horn itself was mentioned in several books as being

symbolic of Christ's ascension since it points heavenward. But another book mentioned the horn representing His side being pierced during crucifixion.

Based on the concept of soul shadows she had read about, each person might have a unicorn connected to their soul. But the creatures were in some other dimension; therefore, people needed to find some way for them to enter our world. The writer of this theory recommended following God's path, resisting the distractions of the world, developing clarity of thought and purity, and focusing on things above, not on the things of the earth. If we were to do this, we would become more Christlike and more like the type of creature a unicorn would want to connect with. One book specifically stated that the closer we get to being what God intended, more like His Son, the closer we will be to finding a unicorn.

In remembering that unicorns communicate by thought, Vini again recalled Mrs. Doyle's comment that the unused part of the brain might be where all of the unicorns are hiding. But she couldn't make anything out of this in her pondering, especially since nothing in her research supported this idea. However, Mrs. Doyle had also said that unicorns are connected to water, which was definitely supported by Vini's research; and not just that the creatures were connected to water, but possibly to baptism and purifying as well. *The human body is over half water*, her brain mullied. *So unicorns are not only related to water, human beings are too. But wait...*her mind stopped her. *Water is the missing element.*

She had, of course, thought of this before. With the other three elements present and represented in magical creatures that were accessible to her—air, earth, and fire equaling the wind horse, the thunderbird, and the firebirds—she had felt sure the fourth element would be the unicorn. And if God had allowed her to find the other three, she was bound to find the unicorn too. Sometimes, this was all that was wrong with people failing to reach goals—they didn't have enough faith or trust in God. Also according to her notes, unicorns might be related to quintessence, that mysterious fifth element, which she would eventually need to do more research on.

As she was dust mopping floors, Vini suddenly realized she was feeling very bogged down by her notes. Though her research was

probably adding up to a fairly correct profile of a unicorn, she didn't think there was quite enough truth in her jumble of notes to equal an actual blueprint for finding one. With so much information about unicorns, even with her gift of discernment, it was difficult to tell exactly what might be the real truth. Perhaps it was all too much.

Taking a deep breath, Vini recalled her steps so far toward finding a unicorn. Everything important thus far had basically just fallen into her lap—access to a fabulous library, Tulko, the clock key, the box, and the bible. There was no reason the rest shouldn't be this easy too.

Just relax and trust in God, she told herself. Nothing is too hard for Him. Human beings sometimes ended up struggling simply because they wouldn't hand over control of their lives to God. Surrendering was probably the key, just letting things happen. Instead of working so hard, she should just live and let God guide her. *He's brought me this far; there's no reason I shouldn't completely trust Him.*

Reading the bible and praying in the evening helped Vini realize that she had reached a correct conclusion. And in turning the matter completely over to God, she felt relaxed, happy, and confident.

On Wednesday at work, on a break in the library, she again determined to let God have complete charge. In doing so, she could feel His hand guiding her, specifically, in refocusing on the zippered bible that He had led her to, which Vini happened to have with her. Since the bible was the newest piece of the puzzle, it certainly deserved her full attention.

She also felt His hand in leading her out into the garden to read. The sunlight was beautiful filtering through the trees, and the day was warm enough that she didn't need a jacket, not even to sit in a shady area.

Parking herself on a wooden bench under an oak tree, Vini unzipped the bible to read a few of her favorite quotes, before taking up her journal, which she had brought with her, not for her research notes, but because she wanted to review all of the bracketed passages in one place, without flipping through the bible in search of them. She also liked the order in which she had recorded them, as it somehow seemed meant to be.

Beginning to read the quotes, Vini had just completed the first three when she sensed Tulko somewhere in the area, but outside of the garden, instead of close by. He only stayed for a few moments.

Finishing two more of the passages, she faintly felt the presence of Lyydu somewhere in the neighborhood. Like Tulko, he too was gone in mere seconds, and Vini vaguely wondered if he might be taking Charlie on an outing, to help cure her fear of heights.

After reading four more of the bracketed passages, she thought she felt the warmth of one of the firebirds somewhere in the sky above. Since Sam was scheduled to work in the afternoon, perhaps he was on his way, accompanied by the ever-watchful Beme. However, as the warmth became more distant in just a few seconds, it seemed doubtful that Sam was nearby.

As she finished off the remaining three passages, Vini closed her eyes. Since all twelve verses were extremely uplifting, she felt incredibly content, at peace, and full of joy.

Very relaxed and breathing deeply, she suddenly saw a dazzling light that almost made it seem as though her eyes were open to bright daylight, except that they were still closed, and she slightly imagined that a gigantic ball of light materializing in front of her had forced her to close her eyes. But it wasn't just an ordinary light in front of her, as there was a definite warmth to it, like a heater perhaps turned on to a low setting. She briefly thought one of the firebirds might have dropped down into the garden in front of her, but she quickly realized that this could not be. If either Beme or Jelzey had lit up this brightly, the intensity would have incinerated Vini and probably half of the garden. No, the warmth felt more like the contentedness she felt when taking a warm bath.

Though not afraid, Vini was somewhat reluctant to open her eyes. She knew she must, sometime, though her delay wasn't as long as her brain imagined, being really only about three seconds since the object of light, or presence, had appeared in front of her. That was it—more like a presence, like that of Tulko or Lyydu, but different somehow.

Opening her eyes slowly, Vini thought she might need to squint. This was not the case because the light in front of her, though brilliant and golden, was not glaring.

The eyes of the unicorn standing before her resembled those of a lion, more so than a horse, and they actually looked somewhat familiar, though Vini couldn't imagine why. Nor could she imagine a lion with blue eyes, though they seemed to fit the creature perfectly.

For as long and as hopefully as she had been waiting for this moment, the oddest thought ended up popping into her head. *I wonder if all unicorns have blue eyes.*

Even odder was the fact that the wonder over eye color was Vini's only thought for the entire thirty seconds that the creature remained standing in front of her and staring into her mesmerized eyes.

Though it was a long frozen moment, the thirty seconds didn't seem long to Vini, who was brought out of her trance when the creature suddenly vanished, leaving only a shimmer of golden light behind, which dimmed and disappeared entirely in less than two seconds.

Her brain working properly again, Vini realized that she hadn't heard a whisper when the unicorn left, but more something like the sound of a distant waterfall.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Message in a Bottle

Vini stood up after the unicorn left, but ended up having to sit down again because her legs were shaking.

Mrs. Doyle had seen the unicorn from a window, the entire thirty-second visit, and was running across the lawn toward her.

“I never thought I would see one in my lifetime,” she said breathlessly as she arrived to a skidding stop in front of the bench. “How did you do it? Do you have a unicorn whistle?”

Dazed and somewhat pale, Vini answered slowly, “I don’t...know...exactly how I did it.”

When her legs had steadied, she and Mrs. Doyle made their way to the back porch and into the kitchen, where they had tall glasses of milk and the last of Charlie’s excellent cookies that Mrs. Doyle had stashed in a secret place to keep Pizzo from eating them all. (Pizzo, like Ben, thought they were the best cookies he had ever eaten, and basically hadn’t been able to resist gorging himself on them.)

“God did it, not me,” Vini said, answering the question Mrs. Doyle had asked in the garden more correctly this time.

“He gave you the means,” Mrs. Doyle responded, nodding, “but surely you would have had to do something.”

“Well,” Vini answered, still perplexed because she truly had no idea as to what she might have done to make a unicorn appear, “I was reading bible verses that I copied into my journal from a bible I found in Japan. I was just reading them to myself, not aloud.”

Sam had just arrived, sad that he had missed the last of the cookies, but even sadder, of course, when he was told that he had just missed seeing a unicorn.

“I can’t believe it!” he said. “Right here in the garden?”

As Vini nodded, Mrs. Doyle confirmed, “Right here in the garden.”

“I did feel Tulko and Lyydu somewhat nearby before it happened,” Vini said. “And I thought Beme may have been around too. I wonder if they somehow called the unicorn.”

“Unlikely,” Mrs. Doyle responded. “I think you did it somehow. Did you hear any thoughts, inside your brain?”

Shaking her head, Vini replied, “I might have forgotten to listen.”

“If the unicorn had spoken to you,” Mrs. Doyle said, “I’m sure you would have heard.”

“He probably just didn’t have anything to tell me at this time,” Vini said.

“So they are definitely golden in color, just like we’ve read about,” Mrs. Doyle said, “at least that one was.”

Nodding, Vini said, “And mostly looking like a horse, but the eyes reminded me of a lion...except they were blue. That seemed strange.”

Sam and Mrs. Doyle both also thought the blue eyes were somewhat odd.

Running through everything about the encounter in her mind at home, Vini still wasn’t sure how it happened. However, she finally remembered to thank God for the experience. *Dear Lord, I’m sorry I forgot to thank You at the time. Thank You, thank You, thank You...for the wonderful, magical visit. If I did something to make the unicorn appear, please help me do it again in the future. I truly want to make the world a better place with more goodness in it.*

Vini would never know it, but the time the unicorn spent in her neighborhood, a mere forty-two seconds in total, did produce goodness in several ways.

A person who had been hiking and got caught up in a bramble that was full of poison oak was able to see that having to suffer scratches and a painful rash was nothing compared to what might have happened if he hadn’t been delayed. In fact, the time the hiker had spent untangling himself allowed a poisonous snake time to get out of his way in the overgrown path ahead of him.

Mr. Galloway himself was the recipient of a similar revelation. Earlier in the day, he had been inconvenienced and delayed nearly an hour by a mix-up at the pharmacy involving a prescription he was picking up for his wife. On his way home, he had then had to wait over twenty minutes at a railway crossing for a train to switch tracks.

However, as the unicorn passed through his garden (to admire his topiaries), Mr. Galloway, though still cranky and grumbling from the two delays, suddenly realized that in going through a particular intersection over an hour later than planned, he had avoided being in a terrible car accident.

Another of Vini's neighbors also received the benefit from the passing unicorn, a woman who suffered from depression and who was having a pretty bad week. Her dishwasher had broken, she had a flat tire, her wallet containing cash and several credit cards was stolen, and a large delivery truck had smashed into the front of her house causing serious damage. And all of this had occurred within a period of three days. Unable to understand why all of these stressful things were happening to her all at once, she was in a good deal of despair, until a thought suddenly hit her that she somehow knew to be perfectly true. The tearful delivery driver had said that this was her third accident and she was fearful of losing her job. What actually happened was that she was transferred to a more suitable job within the same company, the result being that she didn't have her fourth accident, one that would have killed a child playing in a driveway, which, of course, would have been devastating to many people on many levels, including to the delivery driver. Just knowing this, the homeowner was much happier while dealing with the repairs and the insurance company over the next few weeks.

Though Vini was happy she had seen a unicorn, she wasn't quite sure what to make of the visit, as far as how it might have brought some good into the world. And when thinking about how to find or produce one again, she ended up having about as many questions as she did nearly a year ago, when the whole quest had begun. However, if it was meant to be, Vini felt sure God would help her figure out how to make a unicorn appear again. She just felt very confident that if He had helped her do it once, He would help her do it again.

Mrs. Doyle's statement that she never thought she would see a unicorn in her lifetime ended up being an odd one because she died that very night.

Vini couldn't believe it when Violet showed up at the door Thursday around noon to tell her. Thankfully, her mother was home because she would shortly be needed to help calm and comfort her

grief-stricken daughter. Preston currently wasn't at home because he was having a two-night sleepover with a friend.

"She fell from the widow's walk yesterday evening," Violet said, as they all took a seat on the couch. "She had evidently been sitting out there reading. There was a book and a cup of tea on a table by her chair. But I found her on the ground below. I came by around nine last night to pick up a couple of serving dishes she said I could borrow. I'm glad I did; otherwise, she might have stayed there all night."

Somehow knowing there was something Violet wasn't telling her, Vini was wise enough not to ask in front of her mother.

"I know you're not scheduled to work until Saturday," Violet said, "and I know tomorrow is the last day of your spring break. But could you possibly come tomorrow? I could really use your help in getting the house ready for the guests coming on the weekend in advance of the funeral."

"Of course, yes," Vini answered. "I'll be there early."

"I called Charlie and Sam to tell them," Violet added, "but I wanted to tell you in person. Charlie will be coming tomorrow afternoon to help with getting some food prepared for all of the people I'm sure we'll be having, both before and after the funeral. A neighbor has already brought a tray of cold cuts, and I imagine more food will arrive, but you can never have too much in a situation like this."

As Vini's shock suddenly turned to a flood of tears, Violet hugged her before handing her off to her mother who held her and stroked her hair. Mrs. Doyle had, of course, been much more than an employer to Vini, actually something like a grandmother, as well as a very close friend.

"The funeral will be on Monday to give people time to get here," Violet said, "mainly her sister. Albert, Louetta, and their parents are coming late tomorrow."

Of course, Vini and Preston would both take off school on Monday to attend the funeral with their parents.

Giving Vini a consoling kiss on the top of her head, Violet left a few moments later. As her mother held her, Vini continued to cry, almost unable to believe that Mrs. Doyle was gone.

A short while later, when she was slightly more collected, Vini and her mother prayed together, which helped enormously, giving them both a sense of peace and calm.

On Friday at the mansion Vini sensed Tulko staying close, and she could feel his intensity and watchfulness. Vini's mother had dropped her off at the mansion, and Tulko had briefly met her in the garden when she arrived. She could tell he was grieving too. He very much liked Mrs. Doyle and would miss her terribly.

"Well, I know she didn't jump," Violet told Vini as they were having scones and grapes for breakfast. "And she wasn't klutzy or infirm or accident prone, so I don't think she fell." Taking a deep breath, she went on. "But, of course, you can't just tell the authorities it might have been Satan or a demon that pushed her."

Vini was nodding slowly as Violet added, "I guess she could have gotten dizzy, or a wasp or a bee could have got after her and got her off balance as she tried to wave it off. But I think it unlikely."

"A pretty slim chance," Vini agreed.

Changing sheets in one of the guest rooms later, Vini suddenly had to sit down on the bed because she was receiving a flood of thoughts into her brain, from none other than Kugari, who was of course an expert at planting thoughts into human minds and who was letting Vini know exactly what had happened to Mrs. Doyle.

All it took was one good shove and she flew like a twig blown from a tree in a windstorm. She had forgotten to take her cross with her out onto the widow's walk, you see, the demon smugly went on. So that was pretty much an open invitation for me to visit her. She doesn't have a wind horse like you do, always watching, always ready to swoop in. So there was no one to catch her. You should have seen the look on her face as she fell, very surprised.

Vini next heard his laughter, the undertone of which sounded a lot like a metal rasp grating against stone.

The thoughts from the demon ended suddenly as Kugari, who had been perched on the roof of the mansion to deliver his message, had to depart because Tulko, who had been circling the neighborhood, drew too close for his comfort.

Stunned to the point that she felt flushed and sweaty, as well as somewhat numb, Vini rose slowly from the bed on shaky legs.

As she started to make her way downstairs, she paused in front of the tapestry on the third-floor landing whose scrolling letters at the bottom now displayed a quote from Romans 12:19. "...for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'"

She read the quote three times before it registered in her brain as a direct message from God.

Finally understanding, Vini thought, *God will take care of Kugari*. And she was as sure of the truth in this as she was sure that she was alive and breathing. Now slightly less stunned, she made her way downstairs to the kitchen where Violet was.

Charlie had just arrived and was making sandwiches for them.

Vini didn't tell Violet or Charlie what Kugari had told her, nor did she tell Ben when he arrived a few minutes later. But she was definitely worried for the safety of her friends, more so for Violet than for anyone else. *Charlie has Lyydu for protection, her mind mused. The twins have Beme and Jelzey. And Preston has Eleta. But there's no one to protect Violet. Pizzo, maybe?* Somehow Vini couldn't imagine Pizzo being the same kind of protector as Tulko, especially since she knew the little puck troll was specifically attached to Louetta.

In noticing that Violet was wearing a cross pendant, Vini said, "I'm not sure I ever saw that before."

"I always wear it; I never take it off," Violet answered. "Well, I took it off briefly last week to change to a shorter chain. That's why it's more noticeable, because it's not as tucked in under my clothes like it was before."

Since Mrs. Doyle was fond of crosses for protection, and remembering what Kugari had told her, Vini hoped Violet's cross would work just as well.

God will protect her, Vini reminded herself, again as sure of this as she was sure she was alive and breathing. She also knew that God sometimes allowed bad things to happen because He knew they would eventually work out for the greater good, as part of His overall plan.

Noting the subdued demeanor of Vini, Charlie, and Ben, which was quite a contrast to their normally fairly-buoyant selves, Violet said quietly, "I know it's going to be hard for a while, but I think it was probably her time to go. And she is now with God, so we can be happy about that."

Vini could almost hear God speaking through Violet, and there was a definite ring of truth to it.

Heading back upstairs to clean a bathroom after lunch, Vini once again stopped in front of the third-floor tapestry, which now displayed the words of Romans 8:28. “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.”

While Kugari was very smug now, he had not too long ago been extremely angry about a plan to kill Vini that had failed. Having early on in his career been able to poison someone with somewhat poor eyesight by switching two bottles of similar size and shape, one containing medicine and the other a poisonous household product, thus making it look like an accident, he had adopted poison as one of his favorite methods of dispatching foes. Able to sneak into the mansion at an opportune moment, when Vini had left a glass of sweet tea on a table on the back porch and when Tulko was off frolicking with a couple of friends, he had added concentrated snake venom to her glass, with the intent of switching out the glass afterwards and making it look as though she had been bitten by a poisonous snake, one of which he was planning to leave dead in the garden. He could always simulate puncture bite marks on her leg by sticking her with a needle while she was in the morgue, one of his favorite places of late to hang out. But it probably wouldn't matter if he couldn't make something resembling a bite mark because kids like Vini were always getting scratched and poked when messing around in back yards and gardens. At the time Kugari had attempted the poisoning, he noticed that she already had a couple of scrapes on her arm and elbow from some or other minor mishap; and anything like that could probably be taken as evidence of an encounter with a deadly snake.

Fortunately for Vini, the demon's plan had been thwarted, by none other than Pizzo, who spilled the glass of tea while stealing a cookie from a plate sitting next to the glass.

Kugari had been furious at the time. *Wretched little creature! Curse all puck trolls! For as offensive as they are, they somehow manage to bumble around doing good things! They're nothing but goodness disguised as disagreeability! And that isn't fair! They should be foul, for as foul as they act most of the time!*

Still enraged weeks later in recalling the event, he fumed in a calculatingly sort of way. *Well, as soon as I take care of her, I'll see about getting rid of that little art-loving troll.*

Having failed at the poisoning, Kugari was next planning to work on causing a horse accident for Vini at camp during the upcoming summer. Since people sometimes got hurt around horses, this seemed like the next logical step. The horses could be spooked, possibly by a fire; then they could either trample or fall on the girl. If he could just get the wind horse separated from her, which might prove difficult because there was another wind horse that liked to hang out around the stables, helping to hold those wretched children in their saddles. There was also the complication of the thunderbird that might be in the area, if that other girl ended up taking the assistant cook job.

But Kugari liked challenges. There was no sense to him in being part of anything too easy. Demons choosing an easy path, like those that liked to sleep up chimneys and in the trunks of abandoned cars, were never favored by the Master, or any of the higher-ups for that matter. And lazier demons were often reckless, forgetting to think before acting. Satan had not been happy at all with the reckless events of the pack of demons on the rooftop the previous weekend. All it would have taken was one person with binoculars before the storm curtains were in place for someone to see, and know.

But even with making plans for a horse accident, Kugari had realized that he might need to make a back-up plan, in case she actually managed to find a unicorn before going to summer camp.

Upon learning from a hobgoblin in the area that Vini *had* managed to call a unicorn, which had appeared in the garden, before trotting around the neighborhood, Kugari feared all was lost. However, he had also found out that she hadn't yet figured out exactly how she had done it. At this time, at least, she wouldn't be able to repeat the act, or teach someone else how to summon a unicorn. So he could still make plans that would hopefully be effective. At this point, thankfully, he was not in too much trouble with Satan for failing. But he was very worried that if he didn't produce results in the near future, he soon would be.

Ureg, after having a discussion with several higher-ups, had told Kugari, "All is grave, but all is not lost. Keep at it!"

Determined to do just that, an inspiration hit Kugari, in the garden, while he was spying on the house, perched high in a tree very near the spot where the unicorn had appeared. Seeing the old woman alone on the widow's walk and without her cross, another plan (possibly even better than his idea of a horse accident), rapidly formed in his mind. Kugari knew he was being impulsive, and that it was often not good to act impulsively; but he saw what he thought was a golden opportunity, except that he hated gold, since that was the color of most unicorns. However, having chosen to act and having killed the woman, the demon was rather pleased with himself because he felt sure this would help him achieve his purpose.

Though the funeral was Monday afternoon, Vini and Preston stayed home from school the morning too, which was a good thing because both were rather distracted, with Vini experiencing occasional bouts of crying, along with nervousness and some difficulty breathing. Of course, she hadn't slept well for several nights in a row, which didn't help to soothe her raw emotions.

Saying goodbye to Mrs. Doyle was difficult, but the service was a lovely testament to her life and helped Vini feel somewhat better.

The reading of the will happened on Thursday evening at the mansion, and the whole Aberdeen family was surprised that they were asked to be there. Charlie and her father were also there, perplexed too as to why they had been invited. Sam and his uncle were there as well, though they couldn't imagine why either. This was the first time Vini had met John Dellinger, who was a quiet man, a little shorter than either of the twins.

Mrs. Doyle's journals were one of the first items on the list when the lawyer began reading the will. Though Vini didn't interrupt to ask a question, she was very confused, not only because the journals had been left to her, but also because she had never noticed any journals in the mansion, nor had Mrs. Doyle ever mentioned them, other than saying she had put her notes in journals when she was a girl. *There must be a couple in the library somewhere, she thought, but I just didn't notice them on the shelves, among so many other books.*

Vini was also to have lifetime access to all of Mrs. Doyle's books; and if Violet, who was inheriting the bulk of the estate, including the house and most of its contents, were to ever sell the mansion, she would

be required to still provide access to the books wherever they might be stored. Both the books and Mrs. Doyle's religious artifacts were not to be sold, but could only be willed to an heir, or heirs, of Violet's choosing.

Violet likely would never sell the mansion or any of its contents. In fact, she had already moved some of her things into the house before Mrs. Doyle died. With her husband retiring, at Mrs. Doyle's invitation, Violet had planned to give up her rented apartment so that she and Dave could come live at the mansion permanently.

Charlie was willed nearly forty vintage cookbooks, which surprised her greatly. This didn't surprise Vini because Mrs. Doyle had mentioned many times that she thought Charlie was practically a genius in the kitchen.

What was incredibly surprising was what was read next. Money had already been set aside in annuity accounts for Vini, Preston, Sam, and Charlie to be used strictly for education beyond high school, either traditional college or vocational training. Though it wouldn't be enough to cover everything for four years of education, it was estimated to be enough to get them each through a full two years of college at a state school, including their room and board.

Charlie was truly speechless and very pale for quite a while after the meeting. When talking to Vini later, she said, "My dad says this is truly a gift from God. And it's more than I'll need to get all the way through culinary school."

"Then you should use the rest for some regular college classes, like business or management or accounting, like your dad said," Vini answered. "You'll probably need all of that to be really successful in business."

Mr. Dellinger was ecstatic too. He had hoped that by the time Sam and Ben entered college, it might be safe for them to officially be two people again. Then, double tuition would have to be paid. But even if this was not the case, if they still had to pretend to be one person, the extra money would help greatly.

Money was left to Louetta and Albert too for their future education. Louetta was also to receive two paintings in the mansion by a well-known European artist, while Albert was getting several items that had belonged to Mrs. Doyle's husband, mainly two watches and a small

stamp collection. Albert was also to have one of the wooden model ships that Mrs. Doyle's father had built.

Mrs. Doyle's sister, Annabelle Simms, was left a few pieces of jewelry and seemed more than content with this, as she didn't particularly need or want anything else. Except, later, she did ask Violet if she could have a set of cookie cutters that she remembered from her childhood because both sisters had enjoyed helping their mother bake cookies.

Annabelle, as Ms. Simms wanted everyone (even the younger folk) to call her, was nothing like her sister. For one thing, she was a very short woman in contrast to Mrs. Doyle who was probably one of the tallest women of her generation at five foot ten inches. Annabelle was also incredibly talkative, almost to the point of being boisterous, while Mrs. Doyle definitely had a more reserved nature. Vini hadn't particularly noticed the talkativeness on the day of the funeral because she hadn't spoken to Annabelle much, but it was very obvious in visiting with her after the will was read. The difference in personality wasn't particularly surprising to Vini since she knew siblings were often very different from one another. She had noticed recently that Ben was definitely more outgoing than Sam.

In talking to everyone after the lawyer left, Charlie's dad stated, "I just can't help wondering why she would be so generous to a bunch of kids that were not even part of her own family."

Violet then explained to everyone that her Cousin Frances had been unable to have kids of her own. "She and Gerard had once taken in two foster kids, and were planning to adopt them," Violet added. "But Emily and George were both killed in a van accident, and it was somewhat odd. Another foster mother was taking them and her own three foster kids to an amusement park for the day. When the crash happened, everyone else in the van barely got a scratch. I think Frances and Gerard took this as a sign that they really weren't meant to have their own children," she went on. "So they didn't try again as far as fostering and adopting. But they both really did like kids. That's why they were always so happy to have Albert and Louetta around; and, of course, why it was so easy for her to get attached to Vini, Charlie, Preston, and Sam."

Violet still wanted Vini to work her same work schedule, if Vini wanted to and felt able to.

On Saturday, when taking a break, Vini had a quick look around in the library for Mrs. Doyle's journals. In not finding them, she decided not to worry about where they were right now, mainly because she had enough other things on her mind. Having some difficulty sleeping and concentrating, Vini was struggling somewhat to finish a couple of school projects so that she wouldn't get behind or get bad grades. She was also busy with her normal chores at home. She also didn't feel the journals would be necessary for her research, particularly since Mrs. Doyle hadn't even mentioned them, other than the one time when giving Vini the blank journal. While they were likely going to be interesting to read, since they were probably from Mrs. Doyle's childhood, Vini felt it unlikely they would contain anything that might be needed for her research. Plus, in still having only tapped the surface of Mrs. Doyle's library, Vini had plenty of books to read right now, so she felt the journals were a low priority to find.

Meanwhile, Kugari couldn't have been more pleased with himself, and the initial success of his impromptu plan. In noticing the fondness of the girl for Mrs. Doyle, like the love one would have for a grandmother, he would break Vini's heart by killing the woman. Whether attributed to accident or suicide (probably accident), Kugari didn't care because he would let the girl know it was him. He would also plant thoughts in Vini's mind about how God hadn't protected the woman. This would then make her angry, not only at God but at the whole world, so angry that God probably wouldn't trust her with the wind horse anymore, and would take it from her. Vini would feel a tremendous amount of guilt too. She would blame herself because the woman wouldn't have been in harm's way if not for her, and her stupid unicorn project.

Unfortunately, most of what Kugari was gloating over was happening. Vini was angry, and blaming herself, and feeling guilty. In fact, almost hourly during the first few days after Mrs. Doyle's death, she was passing in and out of various dangerous states of emotions. However, thankfully, she somehow managed to break free from the ugly thoughts and feelings plaguing her in short little spurts, during

which she asked for forgiveness from God, and asked Him to help her through this troubling time.

Over the next couple of weeks, as Vini tried to pray, she felt very distracted. She was also irritable whenever Preston was making too much noise. And in not feeling particularly motivated to do anything, she basically had to force herself to function, just to get through the basics of her daily routine. She skipped two water polo practices. Feeling constantly sad and lethargic, she wasn't hungry, though she did force herself to eat because she knew she should. Though her crying episodes became fewer, she was still feeling guilty. To top it all off, she was having mild headaches nearly every day, and often felt panicked for seemingly no reason, which made it difficult for her to breathe properly, the breaths being shallow and gasping instead of deep and even. And though there were plenty of people around, she often felt lonely.

She was not necessarily angry at God, particularly because she knew Mrs. Doyle wouldn't have wanted her to feel this way. Also, she kept reminding herself that God promises He will make all things work together for good. And she knew that God always keeps His promises.

At one time when feelings of guilt were bombarding her, she told God, *I wish I could turn back time*. This made her think of the big clock of the universe that she had once imagined. *Maybe a unicorn could turn it back*, she thought. *So I should get going on trying to figure out what brought the unicorn, so I can make it happen again. Then, the unicorn can turn back time, and I can save Mrs. Doyle.*

Vini very quickly realized that this was all just wishful thinking, particularly because she had read enough science fiction books to know the dangers of changing things in the past.

With both Satan and Kugari watching on and bombarding her mind with ugly thoughts, Vini was really struggling. They were, of course, hoping and expecting her to slip into depression, to shrink and hide, instead of stepping out and forward. *She won't roar, she'll cower*, Kugari thought happily.

Learning the outcome of the case involving the teen who had killed the fellow student at school the previous year ended up adding to her despair. Despite basically being guilty of murder, the bully was convicted simply of misdemeanor assault and ended up receiving probation only as a punishment. When shown on the evening news,

happy about so light a sentence, the kid was sauntering around, smiling, as though he couldn't care less that he had killed someone. *What was the world coming to?* This was very distressing, completely unsettling, and certainly didn't help to ease the burdens weighing upon Vini's mind, body, and spirit.

However, in remembering how she had gotten control of her depressive symptoms before, Vini forced herself to keep to a sleep schedule, to go to water polo practice, and to eat right. She also reminded herself that God takes weakness and makes it into strength. *He tries and tests us; but when we pass the test, we are stronger than we could ever imagine. He gives us strength, particularly when we rely on Him.*

After nearly two weeks of fitful sleep, Vini finally had one night of deep and peaceful sleep, during which she dreamed of a conversation she had recently had with Mrs. Doyle about all of the changes in the world, many bad.

"Some of the changes are good," Mrs. Doyle insisted. "I wouldn't want to have to make do without a microwave. And I like my garage door opener. But I don't approve of people always talking to each other by email and phone instead of in person. And I can't see any good coming from people's noses being buried in various gadgets four and five and hours a day, or more. Imagine what they could be doing instead, like getting exercise, or getting more of an education, or getting some work skills."

"Or finding cures for diseases," Vini said, "or helping to repair someone's house, or growing food for the hungry."

What was added in the dream that hadn't been part of their real-life conversation was Mrs. Doyle saying, "Don't worry; everything will be okay. You will see many changes in your lifetime, just as I have in mine, but you will weather them just fine. And some of the changes will be good, very good."

In recognizing God talking to her through Mrs. Doyle, and through her dream, obviously, Vini was greatly comforted.

The next day as she was in her bedroom, Kugari (perched on the roof because he needed to be somewhat nearby to do his work) whispered ugly thoughts to her; but she didn't hear them. The demon had shapeshifted to a smaller size, to about that of a common guinea

pig, and had matched his color to that of the roof, so that his presence would be less likely to be noticed, not just by human beings who might see from the upper floors of taller houses, but by various birds such as hawks, kestrels, and even doves who definitely disliked demons and who often found ways to notify nearby magical creatures, like gargoyles, who were capable of routing demons.

If only she wasn't reading the bible so much, he whined, curled up tight next to the chimney stack.

Just the thought of being near the dreaded Scriptures burned his eyes. And taking in a breath, even on the roof a good thirty feet away from the horrible book, burned his lungs. If only his predecessors had done their part in preventing the writers from recording God's Word. These must have been either weak demons, or very strong humans, who wouldn't turn, or manipulate, and who didn't mind persecution. In leaving this book for generations to come, they severely limited his Master's effectiveness, putting more limits on him than should have been.

Vini didn't turn, unless it was more toward God. And what Kugari hadn't taken into account in his impulsiveness of killing Mrs. Doyle was the fact that trying experiences often help Christians to grow in their walk with God, to be even more effective and determined during their lifetimes.

An odd thing happened on a Friday two days after Vini's dream of her conversation with Mrs. Doyle. The zippered bible and her spiral binder full of her notes were stolen from the bookshelf in her room. Whoever took them left the window open. Upon coming home from school and discovering the theft, Vini assumed it had been Kugari, particularly because Preston a short while before had witnessed Eleta fighting the demon over Vini's backpack containing her journal and a couple of Mrs. Doyle's library books. Having heard something strange, the vritsee had flown from Preston's room to investigate. With her unusual strength (unusual given her size), she had grabbed hold of the strap of the backpack with her two front feet and had managed to yank it away from Kugari, who was leaning in through the open window, just able to reach the pack with his long arms and claws that he had abnormally extended using his shapeshifting abilities. Losing his grasp on the backpack, the demon hastily fled, mainly because Tulko was

fairly near, hovering over Vini's bus stop waiting for her since he knew her bus generally arrived about ten minutes after her brother's.

Having most of her notes recorded in the journal, particularly the important ones, Vini rarely used her binder anymore. And she had found all of the bracketed passages in the bible. Since she hadn't noticed anything else about the bible that might be important, she hoped it wouldn't cause a problem in the future, as far as being able to figure out how to find more unicorns.

Based on her class schedule this particular semester, Vini had only been taking her backpack with her to school on certain days, mainly because she was taking a gym bag on water-polo days and didn't want to carry anything extra. Vowing to take her backpack with her every day from now on, Vini was very thankful that Eleta had been in the house and on the alert.

Fortunately, the bottle she had found in Japan was still on the bookshelf, and Vini suddenly had an idea.

Carefully removing the paper from the bottle, she smoothed it on her desk to make it as flat as possible so that she could write on it. She then copied the bracketed passages from the zippered bible that she had recorded in her journal onto the paper. She had to write fairly small to fit all twelve on one side of the paper, but they did all just fit. Vini then recorked the bottle and lit a candle, using the melting wax to completely cover the cork and the rim of the bottle to create a good waterproof seal.

Early the next morning before going to work, Vini asked Tulko to take her to a secluded beach, any beach, which ended up being in Chile. Standing in the warm sunshine on the glittering sand, Vini threw the bottle as far out into the ocean as she could. What came back to her, almost like a speeding boomerang, was a tremendous sense of peace in somehow knowing that this was what she was meant to do. Someone would find the bottle someday, and read the inspirational bible verses. And perhaps this might make a difference in that person's life.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The Key to the Library

When Easter arrived, Vini was pleased that several students, Boyd included, were handing out plastic eggs containing candy and bible verses. Since it didn't appear "organized and planned" and wasn't large scale, they didn't get into any trouble. Some kids had brought Easter lilies to school to give to teachers and friends. Vini also happened to notice, on Good Friday especially, that a lot of students were wearing crosses. At least the school hadn't outlawed necklaces and pins, so as to allow a little freedom of expression.

Since her husband would be returning home in about three weeks, Violet asked Vini for a little extra help in sprucing up the mansion, and in getting a few things reorganized like the contents of attic boxes and trunks, and the items on kitchen shelves and in cupboards. "I want to be all organized when Dave gets here," she told Vini, who didn't mind the extra work hours because she preferred to stay busy.

Just after Easter, Louetta and Albert were at the mansion for another week because their private school basically allowed a second spring break for their students so that juniors and seniors could visit various college campuses. Freshmen and sophomores could also take off, if they wanted to, which many did. The school was still open, but attendance was voluntary. With most of the teachers having the week off too, classes were combined, with the curriculum mainly consisting of various workshops, lectures by guests, and tutoring sessions conducted by local college students. Many families planned holiday trips during that week, in order to beat the summer crowds to various tourist destinations. With their parents both working, Louetta and Albert decided to visit Violet, who wanted them to continue to be able to spend as much time at the mansion as possible before they got too busy with college to do so.

When their parents dropped them off on the first Saturday of their stay, Louetta had a surprise gift for Vini—the painting she had so admired.

Vini was speechless, since she definitely hadn't expected Louetta to want to part with the treasure so soon. In addition to her usual artist's signature on the front, Louetta had signed the back of her creation and had included the title of *Hope Joy Peace*.

"What might have been," she told Vini, "and what could still be if people decided to live right and follow God."

In addition to coming on Saturdays, Vini came three days after school during the week that Albert and Louetta were there. On Tuesday, she was able to see a lovely creation that Louetta had been working on for two days, which was a trompe l'oeil painting of a cat napping in a fireplace done on one of the walls in the music room. Vini marveled at the cat and the fireplace, both of which looked incredibly real; and she could almost imagine that she could see the cat breathing while sleeping, his side gently rising and falling with each breath. She also almost expected the small pile of gray ashes in the grate to be swept up with the first passing breeze, for as airy and real as the pile looked.

"I should have thought of doing this before," Louetta somewhat tearfully told Vini. "Aunt Frances always wanted a cat, but was allergic."

Missing Mrs. Doyle greatly, Vini was tearful as well.

Piszo, too, was very upset. Since Mrs. Doyle had died, he had been hiding a lot and crying. He had been born in Doyle Mansion, thirty-seven years ago, and this was the only house he had ever lived in. Though no stranger to grief, both of his parents having died ten years ago, he was still very upset at the passing of the old woman, whom he genuinely liked, though he could never show it. Louetta's coming again had somewhat comforted and slightly cheered him, at least as far as it was possible for a puck troll to be comforted and cheered.

Piszo was not sure how he felt about the cat in the fireplace, because he thought Louetta had painted plenty of cats already. But he definitely admired her work. Of course, she could have simply painted a circle, and not even a very symmetrical one, and Piszo probably would have still wholeheartedly approved and adored it.

When Vini was at the mansion on Wednesday after school, Albert and Louetta showed her a trap door under a rug in one corner of the library, which was an emergency exit in the form of a slide that led down to the basement.

“How amazing!” Vini exclaimed, peering down into the darkened tunnel that was about four feet wide, with the metal slide, resembling those in older playgrounds, being about two feet in width. Only the top eight feet or so of the slide was visible because the tunnel curved and was not lighted.

“We totally forgot about this,” Louetta said, “but Aunt Frances used to let us play on the slide whenever we wanted when we were little. It was super fun.”

“I got to thinking about it,” Albert added, “when we heard what happened on the roof. I thought this might be needed for an escape route sometime.”

“We should try it out,” Vini said excitedly. In slightly trying to cover up that she wanted to play on the slide, she added in a more serious tone, “Just to make sure it still works.”

“Of course,” Louetta said, in an overly serious but joking manner, as she saw right through Vini’s words to the actual truth.

Albert went first. “Just to make sure it’s still safe,” he told the girls, but obviously wanting to show them that he was a tough and brave guy.

Taking a deep breath, he sat down and gave a small shove against the wall to get started, after which, he slid, disappearing in less than two seconds.

“It’s pretty steep after the first ten feet or so,” Louetta told Vini. “At the bottom, there’s a flat landing in front of a door in the paneling that opens out into the basement. From the basement side, you can’t even see the door because it can only be opened from the slide-tunnel side.”

“*It’s okay!*” they heard Albert calling from below, though very faintly. “*I made it all the way down!*”

Vini went next, and it was a thrilling ride, though lasting only a mere eight or nine seconds. The slide-tunnel always curved to the right as it made its way down through the mansion walls, and Vini guessed that it probably made pretty much a complete circle around the parlor below the library on its way to the basement. Since the tunnel wasn’t

stuffy, she thought it must be ventilated, and the breeze created by her movement was particularly nice, alleviating any feeling of claustrophobia she might have had in such an enclosed space.

A small light on the landing was left constantly on, so that those using the slide could find the door latch to be able to exit. Spare light bulbs were located in a small wall niche very handy by the door.

Albert was waiting to help Vini step out of the tunnel, and down, because there was a drop of nearly four feet to the basement floor. As Vini and Albert fumbled around for a light switch in the basement (which would have been better to have thought of beforehand), Louetta arrived, breathlessly climbing out of the paneled door.

When the basement lights were on, they had a good laugh at one another because they were all just about completely covered with dust, dirt, and cobwebs.

Pulling three towels out of the laundry basket, they brushed off as well as possible before heading upstairs, where they met Violet just coming down the hall.

“What on earth just happened to you three?!” she exclaimed.

Of course, after hearing about the adventure, Violet wanted to have a go too. “Cousin Frances told me about the slide once,” she said, “but I forgot. How exciting!”

Albert again went down first, so that he could help Violet, who went second, out of the tunnel; and Vini and Louetta followed.

On the second trip down, which might have cleaned the tunnel a slight bit more, they all ended up getting just about as dirty as they had on the first run.

“It’s going to take more than a few trips down to get it clean,” Violet said, sneezing from the dust.

“I’m guessing it hasn’t been used for seven or eight years,” Louetta speculated.

“But Mrs. Doyle must have changed the light bulb somehow during that time,” Vini said, examining the door to see if it could somehow be opened from the basement side.

Albert ended up finding a small notch concealed behind one edge of the door that somehow did connect to the latch inside and would allow entry from the basement. “I never knew it could open from this side,” Louetta said.

“This would be handy if we ever need a place to hide,” Violet said.

They decided that there would be just about enough room for three or four people to crowd together on the landing in an emergency.

“We’ll put our heads together and come up with a plan for cleaning in there,” Violet told Vini, “maybe just a bunch of trips down the slide holding towels against the walls.”

“Maybe Sam and Ben could help,” Vini suggested, “if they want to.”

“Who wouldn’t want to play on a slide for a couple of hours?” Albert said. “Maybe we’ll work on it some too while we’re here,” he suggested to his sister.

“I’m game if you are,” Louetta said.

When Vini arrived home in such a dirty state, and when she told the story to her bewildered family, Preston basically begged to be allowed to help clean the slide-tunnel. “I’ll pay to do that, instead of Miss Violet paying me.” (Though Violet preferred that everyone simply call her by her first name, Preston had never felt comfortable in doing so, and had always called her Miss Violet.)

After a quick call to the mansion, it was decided that Vini and Preston would both help with the tunnel clean-up Thursday after school. Sam, Ben, and Charlie were also invited to the cleaning party, which ended up being a lot of fun; and they celebrated with a dinner of pizza, salad, and brownies afterwards. In seeing Sam and Ben together, Preston confirmed he already knew about the twins; and while he didn’t know the details, he also knew that he needed to keep their secret.

Albert and Louetta were gone by the time Vini arrived on Saturday for work, their parents having come late Friday to stay the night and leave with their children very early the next morning.

Taking a break from cleaning mid-morning, Vini had another look in the library for Mrs. Doyle’s journals. Still finding none, she asked Violet if she could take a look in Mrs. Doyle’s bedroom, which was still very much as she had left it because Violet was waiting until her husband’s return to start using it as their master bedroom.

“Sure, go ahead,” Violet said. “There’s no place in the house that’s particularly off limits. And I’m sure she would have wanted you to find them, wherever they are.”

Vini had specifically thought of the bedroom when remembering Mrs. Doyle's comment about how she thought girls should write in journals. Since a lot of journal writing occurred in girls' bedrooms, this seemed like a logical place to look. In recalling more of the conversation, Vini felt her employer might have been giving her a hint, not necessarily about the location, but more that there might be something in the journals that could help Vini with her unicorn project. Mrs. Doyle had specifically said that she used to fill journals with notes from her own research. In remembering this, Vini was hopeful that there might even be more than just a couple of them.

Unfortunately, even with a thorough search of the room, including in all of the bureau drawers and inside the boxes on the closet shelves, Vini did not find the journals.

But they must be important, she thought. They were at least important enough to mention in a will.

As she suddenly had a horrible, panicky thought that they might have been stolen, like the zippered bible and her notebook, she sat down on the bed to calm down.

Oh please God, don't let them have been stolen.

Just saying this prayer in her mind did serve to calm her, both body and mind.

Thinking of Mrs. Doyle giving hints (which Vini was sure she had many times, though Vini had a lot of trouble picking up on them), she suddenly thought there might be a secret compartment in the house somewhere, and this led her to remember the time when she discovered the laundry chute.

And what was it Mrs. Doyle had said about secret doors in the basement?

Now, in playing the event back through her head, Mrs. Doyle's words didn't sound nervous, as Vini had at first thought; they sounded emphasized, as though she was giving a hint or a nudge.

All of a sudden getting an eerie feeling (not bad but definitely unusual), Vini could almost hear Mrs. Doyle's words. But this time, instead of "...*secret doors in the basement...*" Vini's mind heard, "*Find the secret doors in the basement.*"

But had Mrs. Doyle been talking about the exit door of the slide-tunnel? If so, why would she have used the word, doors, plural?

There must be another secret door down there, Vini decided.

Flying downstairs to the basement, Vini paused to catch her breath after switching on the lights. Still with the odd and eerie feeling overhanging her, she made a thorough search, which, unfortunately, yielded nothing.

After the roughly twenty-minute search, in switching off the light, she heard a tiny whisper from a far corner of the basement lasting about two seconds that reminded her of the sound she had heard when Mrs. Doyle uncorked the bottle. Glancing in that direction, Vini thought she could see a tiny sliver of light at the top of a tall shelving unit that was full of old paint cans, tools, storage boxes, and other common basement whatnots.

Switching the lights back on, she hurriedly trotted across the floor to investigate. Reaching up to the spot where she had seen the light, she discovered a small lever that when flipped caused the whole shelving unit to swing forward from the wall, like a door, on an elaborate hinge system, behind which another door set into the wall was revealed that was about the size of an ordinary bedroom door.

Trying the glass knob, Vini discovered the door to be locked. Examining the lock, she thought it would take something like a large skeleton key to open it. At least, in the somewhat low light of the basement, it appeared that way.

Pressing her ear to the door, she thought she could hear a slight hum from somewhere behind the wall. A few seconds into her listening, the hum was interrupted by the familiar whispering sound that lasted several seconds this time.

Looking at the lock again, which reminded Vini of the lock on the door of the library, she suddenly thought, very hopefully, *Maybe the key to the library opens more than one door.*

Running upstairs to the library, she fished in her backpack, before racing back down to the basement to try the key, which, unfortunately, didn't fit the lock.

I should have known, she thought, looking more closely at the key, which was not large enough to fit the lock that had a noticeably wider slot.

Come to think of it, she had never had to unlock the library door. Heading back upstairs, she tried the key to make sure it fit. Not paying

as close attention as she should, she accidentally tried to put the top of the key into the slot.

Now that's just silly, she laughingly scolded herself, turning the key around the right way to discover that it was indeed a perfect fit. But the mistake was understandable because the embellished top of the key looked somewhat like a key in and of itself, as squared off and sharp as it was. *No wonder I got confused*, she mused, stowing the key back into her pack.

However, catching her breath in start a moment later, she quickly fished it out again because she suddenly had an idea, like a flash-of-lightning brainstorm.

Running back down to the basement, she held her breath as she inserted the top of the library key into the lock of the mysterious door. Almost afraid the top of the key might break, she turned it gently, whereupon, she heard a small click as the lock yielded.

It fits! she thought elatedly, almost unable to believe that she had had the key in her possession the whole time. At this moment, Vini was incredibly thankful for Eleta for saving her backpack from Kugari, and as she turned the glass doorknob, she thought, *I'll have to find a better place in the future to secure important objects like this key.*

As the door opened, Vini discovered two short flights of stairs leading down to another door that did not have a lock and behind which she made an incredible discovery.

In what would probably be called a subbasement, she found a room easily three times the size of the regular basement above it that was filled with shelves upon shelves of mostly books but also what appeared to be artifacts and collectibles, many of which looked very old.

A large desk holding a computer that was currently turned off sat very near the door. In such a state of shock over the discovery, Vini sat down in the desk chair for a few moments before going upstairs to find Violet who, at first, almost couldn't believe what Vini was telling her, but who followed trustingly down to see the find for herself.

Then it was Violet's turn to make use of the desk chair for a few moments when first taking in the amazing sight.

Vini had turned on one set of lights near the door when she first entered. In heading back into the massive space together, they discovered a second set of switches controlling the lights in the rear half

of the enormous library. Vini couldn't think of anything better to call it than a library, unless, perhaps, a museum.

"It's pretty clean in here and the air is really good," Violet ventured to say after a few minutes of strolling around in awe with Vini. "It must have some kind of ventilation and filtration system," she added, though they couldn't particularly see anything like a utility room or any large machinery. As Vini was nodding, Violet mused, "I'll have Dave do some investigating when he gets home because it's probably something we'll need to maintain, as far as filters and whatever else is needed to keep it running well."

In looking around, they found a huge set of rolled-up architectural drawings for the mansion that totaled probably twenty-five sheets in all, including various plumbing and electrical updates that had been performed over the years. Though she was sure it would be very interesting to study the drawings to see how things like the laundry chute and the slide-tunnel had been fitted into the mansion, Vini was more interested in looking over the other contents of the enormous library.

In thinking that this was where Mrs. Doyle had probably kept her journals, Vini started hunting around for them.

Violet ended up being the one to find them all in a row on a long bookshelf sitting somewhat near the desk, and Vini was stunned to discover that the journals totaled more than fifty.

Since it was nearing lunchtime, at Violet's suggestion, they headed upstairs to quickly have something to eat; after which, they returned to the downstairs library, which is what they had decided to call the subbasement library, to look around even more.

In addition to the books, the shelves and numerous glass cases in the downstairs library were filled with treasures such as pottery, jewelry, weapons, sculptures, ornate boxes, and various other whatnots, obviously from as many places in the world, if not more, than the contents of the upstairs of the house.

"May I have access to these books too?" Vini asked hopefully.

Surprised that Vini would think she needed to ask, Violet answered, "I think this is mainly what Cousin Frances meant. Of course these are yours to use. For sure, both libraries are at your disposal. But I hope the one upstairs won't feel neglected," she joked.

“These are probably a lot of the religious artifacts that Cousin Gerard collected,” Violet said a few moments later, gingerly picking up to examine what looked like half of a knight’s helmet from one of the shelves.

“So she did have a computer,” Vini said, as they were getting ready to leave a couple of hours later. “I’m surprised because I thought she didn’t like them.”

“She probably liked some things about them, but not others,” Violet answered. “If it is password protected, I think I have a good idea as to what the password might be, so I should be able to get in to see what she might have used the computer for.”

Taking two of the journals with her, both she and Violet agreed that keeping the majority of them locked up in the downstairs library was a good idea.

“There must be another key, since she obviously came down here, probably a lot, by the looks of things,” Vini said.

“I always wondered how she spent her evenings,” Violet said, “since I know she didn’t watch much TV.”

“She might have even had some of her naps down here,” Vini said, indicating a large reading area containing a sectional couch and two recliners in one corner of the room.

“Be sure to keep the key safe,” Violet said, “especially since it works for both libraries.”

When leaving and swinging the basement shelf back into place to conceal the door, they discovered a small keypad with a cover cleverly built into the side of the shelf that faced a wall and wasn’t very noticeable on casual scrutiny. “So this is how she could get in without a key,” Vini said.

“I think I have a good idea as to the numbers,” Violet said, proceeding to punch in a code that did indeed serve to unlock the door hidden behind the swinging shelf. “I still think there’s another key,” she added. “Now that you’ve shown it to me, I think I know where to look, in one of her whatnot boxes upstairs. I might have even seen it before.”

Examining the lock again, Violet then said, “I don’t think this is really that old. I think this is something fairly new, but made by some clever locksmith so that it looks old.”

In looking closely, Vini could see what she meant, as the metal was shiny and sharp, and without any scratches that a key might have made over the years. And in taking a closer look at the two-library key, they could see a seam where the newer one belonging to the downstairs library had been soldered onto the older skeleton key that fit the upstairs one.

Just as Mrs. Doyle had previously described, she kept journals like Vini did, mainly with notes from her research and without a lot of daily events or frivolous thoughts added, though there were a few entries about certain important goings on in her life, as well as various humorous and intellectual things people had said over the years that Mrs. Doyle felt were worth remembering by jotting them down.

Reading at home over pretty much the rest of the weekend, Vini was surprised to discover such a vast amount of information in just the two journals she had taken. The last half of one book was filled with information as to how to find certain magical creatures and what their purposes might be. The long list included vritsees, albino pumas, gargoyles, singing snakes, puck trolls, scaly molemites, dragons, will-o-wisps, and even a two-headed llama, which Vini thought was only a character from *Dr. Dolittle*. *So they probably really exist*, she thought with amazement. Toward the end of the list she found a few notes on wind horses. So Mrs. Doyle had known about them, but hadn't wanted to say for some reason. Also listed were vetches and crotons, leading Vini to believe that what Mrs. Doyle had told Sam the time he thought she was pulling his leg was actually true—these creatures did exist.

In a section specifically devoted to unicorns, though Vini wasn't sure the entry directly applied to the creatures, Mrs. Doyle had written something about God appointing watchmen to watch over specific individuals, not to play favorites, but to ensure the protection of certain of His children who were destined to carry out some important purpose in their lives according to His plan.

Vini would have thought this would be true in her case more with regard to Tulko, and not in any way relating to the unicorns she was searching for. But, in fact, she didn't have a clear understanding at this point in her life of the difference between helpers and watchmen, both of which God had definitely provided for her.

A little further along in the unicorn section, Vini nearly jumped from the bed with excitement to discover that there really was such a thing as a unicorn whistle. In fact, according to Mrs. Doyle's research, several might exist.

An entry about bringing goodness into the world also caught her eye.

"Some scholars credit unicorns for bringing mankind out of darkness many times. Most sightings of unicorns have been during some of the darkest times of human history, after which, turnarounds always occurred, which I believe is proof positive that unicorns can bring goodness back into the world."

The handwriting in the journals was lovely, and Vini remembered admiring her employer's penmanship on other occasions as well, which Mrs. Doyle had told her once was the result of learning the Palmer Method in school.

Taking note of how Mrs. Doyle's kept her journals, Vini reminded herself that she should probably start adding dates to her own entries (something she hadn't been doing) because it might be important sometime in the future to remember exactly when she had discovered certain things.

Violet had given Vini a small trunk to keep in her closet that had a lock, and this is where she decided to stow the journals she was basically checking out from the subbasement library, along with her dagger and the library key, which she wouldn't need often because Violet had shared the keypad code with her. It was a trunk of a design that could be screwed or bolted to the floor, if needed, but Vini felt it was probably safe enough with just keeping a couple of other boxes on top of it to hide it, especially because she was now checking her window each time she left her room to make sure it was locked. When out and about on Tulko, she also always locked the door in the den by which she left the house. Having had house keys for many years, it was no trouble to carry them with her in a pocket. Never caring for purses, Vini carried most things in her pockets like her small wallet, keys, and lip balm, because this was handier sometimes than digging in her backpack for these items.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Hope Joy Peace

Vini was working on Wednesday after school at the mansion, which was exactly a week before Violet's husband would be coming home for good.

So far, Violet hadn't told anyone else, like Ben or Sam who were still coming regularly to tend to the garden, about the downstairs library; and she asked Vini not to mention it to anyone either for a while. "I think we should limit access to it right now," she told Vini, "to keep it secret and safe, at least until we can take stock of exactly what all is down there."

Vini had already known not to tell Preston yet, or her parents, and wholeheartedly agreed with Violet to keep it secret for as long as Violet thought it wise to do so.

"Maybe we'll show everyone when Albert and Louetta are back on their summer visit," Violet said. "For now, I think it is best kept just between us. I'll tell Dave when he comes home, of course, but that's it for now."

Briefly visiting the downstairs library before leaving, Vini randomly selected two more journals to take home with her, one from about the middle of the long row, and the other from nearly the end. She definitely planned to someday read them in order; but for now, she felt that God would guide her to pick certain ones, if not Him, then Mrs. Doyle's spirit, which Vini thought she could often sense about the house, especially in the subbasement.

Violet had gotten into the computer, and had discovered some bank account and investment information, but not much else so far. Mrs. Doyle evidently liked to play solitaire on the computer, but both Vini and Violet felt sure she preferred to read and spent most of her time in the downstairs library doing just that.

Vini's father had hung Louetta's painting in her bedroom on the large wall directly across from her bed, a perfect spot for gazing at it

just before going to sleep. Having slept with a flashlight on her nightstand for years, for handy access on nighttime trips to the bathroom, particularly on cloudy or moonless nights, the light now served to allow her one final glimpse of *Hope Joy Peace* in the darkened room before she drifted off to sleep each night.

Busy with school, water polo, and work during the week, Vini wasn't able to delve further into the journals until Saturday afternoon. Shutting herself into her room and warning Preston (in a nice big-sisterly kind of way) to keep it down, she began to read.

A lot of Mrs. Doyle's notes about unicorns were perfectly in line with her own research, as far as things like being connected to water, communicating by thought, somewhat resembling lions, and that the presence of whispers, sand dollars, and light were indicators that unicorns might be nearby. Skipping over many of the ones she was familiar with, a fairly long entry on quintessence caught her eye. "Is this related to unicorns?" Mrs. Doyle had written, after which, she listed several things she had uncovered in her research that had led her to this question.

"Quintessence is heavenly, obviously indicating a close connection to Christ. It is mentioned as something people have access to in connection to baptism. Baptism has to do with water. Unicorns are connected to water. Water makes up over half of human bodies. The research of several biblical scholars suggests that quintessence is a state of hope, joy, and peace that people are able to achieve when they completely surrender their lives to God, fully trusting in Him with all matters of their existence, that He will provide for them, guide them, and work through them. Other research indicates that quintessence is connected to our souls, and soul shadows are mentioned, which are listed in other books as being related to unicorns. One theory connects unicorns to departed souls and mentions quintessence as a means, like a conduit, by which souls in heaven can visit earth. Are these the watchmen God appoints to protect certain people? In other words, are the unicorns the watchmen? Or are angels the watchmen? Hope, joy, and peace have come up in another book, the writer stating he is certain that these three things constitute quintessence. But he doesn't mention unicorns. He simply says these three things are enough for any human

being to possess, everything else being superficial, unimportant. Since unicorns are thought to bring goodness into the world, could the unicorns themselves be quintessence? Or are they perhaps drawn to human beings that are hopeful, joyful, and peaceful? Or do they somehow find hope, joy, and peace floating around somewhere and use them in some way. Or do the unicorns themselves produce these things?”

This was certainly a lot to think about. And what a coincidence that Louetta had titled the painting in Vini’s room, *Hope Joy Peace*.

Switching to the other journal she had borrowed, Vini found it mainly filled with Mrs. Doyle’s personal notes, most of which were much lighter fare than the research notes from the other book.

Flipping around in the journal, near the end, Vini found a note about Sam and Ben. Though Mrs. Doyle had already known their secret, in writing this note before they disclosed exactly who they were, she was calling them Sam One and Sam Two. (Sam Two would later turn out to be Ben.) Vini smiled in reading Mrs. Doyle describing how Sam Two was the one who liked Louetta, but that she probably wouldn’t ever want much to do with him, being married to and in love with her art and not much else. Mrs. Doyle had also stated that Jelzey was connected to Sam Two, while Beme mainly looked after Sam One, which was something Vini had also noticed.

As she flipped back in the book to around the middle, Vini was surprised to discover her own name, not just related to recent events, but also in connection with Mrs. Doyle remembering something of the past.

“I finally got that little Vinster from down the street up to the mansion. (Vini thought Mrs. Doyle’s nickname for her was pretty cute.) Ever since I saw the reflection of a unicorn in her eyes that time she was selling me those Girl Scout cookies, I’ve been trying to think of a way to get her here. She’ll be cleaning for me while Violet is gone, and we’ll see how it goes. I’m pretty sure she’ll be interested in the library because she seems just the type to be a true-blue reader. And I’m pretty sure the unicorn reflected in her eyes means she’s destined for something great. Could she possibly be one who could find a unicorn?”

Vini was completely amazed at this revelation, and it presented yet another mystery. If unicorns were connected to our souls, was Mrs. Doyle seeing part of herself reflected in Vini's eyes? Or was she seeing something inside Vini? Or was she perhaps seeing the future? Vini had read somewhere that certain people could see future events in reflective surfaces.

On Sunday afternoon, feeling the need for fresh air and solitude, telling her parents she was taking a walk, Vini met Tulko near the side gate of the mansion and asked him to take her somewhere, anywhere peaceful with fresh air.

They ended up landing in a secluded mountain meadow, probably a little over an acre in size, filled with soft grasses and wildflowers, and fringed with tall trees that were mostly evergreens. While Tulko was admiring wildflowers and frolicking, but still staying very close to his mistress, Vini spread out a small blanket so that she could lie down and read one of her late employer's journals she had brought with her. However, she ended up doing more musing than reading.

Relying on her gift of discernment when reading Mrs. Doyle's notes, much of what Vini had read so far made sense. But something about the statement that quintessence was simply hope, joy, and peace was ringing more true than anything else—specifically, the simplicity of it.

As far as her own journey toward feeling hopeful, joyful, and peaceful, it had all started when she began reading the bible more, praying more, and trusting in God. She was certain that these actions were what had personally brought her to a state in which she was truly filled with hope, joy, and peace.

In thinking about how the unicorn had appeared, Vini was still sad that the bible she had found in Japan was stolen, and she often kicked herself for not keeping it safer. *What if the bible was what made the unicorn appear? Then, unless I find it, I'll never find another unicorn.*

The word, simplicity, sticking in her mind, she wondered if it was simply reading those specific bracketed bible verses that had produced the unicorn. There was no denying the power of God's Word. And Vini knew first hand that simple things could often be much more effective and powerful than complex things. In specifically thinking

about cleaning equipment, she had discovered that simple was often best because the more complex tools, sometimes overly and poorly designed, had a tendency to break easily. She much preferred a simple broom to a fancy vacuum that had so many buttons and attachments, a person could just about be finished sweeping a whole house before figuring out how to even get started with fitting wands or unraveling cords, not to mention changing bags and belts on occasion. Plus, the noise vacuum cleaners made was often excruciatingly horrible.

Vini hadn't brought her own journal, in which the quotes from the zippered bible were recorded, with her to the meadow. However, having copied them down twice, she could pretty well remember the verses, if not exact quotes, at least in paraphrase.

Let's see, there's the one in Isaiah about how I am honored in His eyes and He has become my strength. Then there's that quote in Jeremiah about how He is with me as a dread warrior. And the end of Psalm 27 is about how I will see the goodness of the Lord in my lifetime and how I should be strong and let my heart take courage. Then, next on the list, I think, is that part in Romans 12 that says we should hate what is evil and love what is good, and that we should outdo one another in showing honor. And it ends with rejoicing in hope, being patient in tribulation, and being constant in prayer.

Vini hadn't even gotten halfway through the list of bracketed quotes in her mind when a unicorn appeared directly in front of her in the meadow, a creature of such bright golden light that Vini couldn't, at first, look directly at it.

Then, either the light dimmed slightly, or her eyes adjusted because as she sat up, the unicorn became bearable to look at, still bright, but also something like soft lamplight so that she was able to see the creature clearly.

Though overjoyed, Vini was confused. If she hadn't made it all the way through the list of bible quotes, and was sort of more just thinking about them and praying, rather than reciting or recalling exact words, was it simply prayer that had called the unicorn?

This may have been partly true; however, this particular unicorn (a different one than Vini had seen in the garden) had appeared more because something incredibly unexpected and dangerous was about to happen in the meadow.

Kugari had decided not to wait for the horse accident. In visiting the camp recently to scope it out and make plans, Valo had run him off. *That dratted wind horse!* Also, the demon had been severely chastised by his superiors for his recklessness in killing Mrs. Doyle because it seemed this act had actually brought the girl closer to God, and closer to finding out more of the secrets surrounding unicorns. Now unlikely to get any reward, and more likely to be slated for punishment and demotion, Kugari was feeling even more reckless, his anger fueling his recklessness. Calling a large group of fellow demons to him, they assembled on the mountain near the meadow containing Vini and Tulko. One wind horse was no match for nearly fifty demons. And while the girl might have that blade with her again, even with it, she would be no match.

The unicorn appeared almost at the exact moment Kugari and his herd swooped into the meadow to attack, but perhaps a split-second before, which distracted both Vini and Tulko from the danger descending upon them.

The brightness of the unicorn forced the demons to land well away from Vini and Tulko. Somehow receiving a thought planted into her brain that she needed to shield her eyes and look away, Vini did just that, only a moment before the unicorn lit up to a brightness several times greater than when it had appeared only moments before.

As the brightness dimmed slightly, and she received a thought that it was safe to look again, in glancing back, Vini watched the scene in front of her almost in what seemed to be slow motion, as the mass of demons appeared to simply melt away in front of her eyes, like slowly vaporizing, with a few remaining stringy wisps of them simply blowing away like dust on the mountain breeze a few seconds later.

The unicorn turned to face Vini for a few seconds, staring into her eyes, before it too disappeared, vanishing in a mere instant.

Again, the eyes of the creature resembled a lion. The feet too, while still hoofed, were something like large furry animal paws. Though overall golden in appearance, the coat of the unicorn swirled with many faint colors, some very similar to those of Tulko.

The creature was gone before Vini remembered the sound she had heard when the unicorn did away with the demons, which was something like a cross between a whinny and a roar, but perhaps more

like the roar of a waterfall than of a beast. As awesome as the power of the unicorn had appeared to be, Vini had no idea that the roar was a mere whisper of what the unicorn was actually capable of.

In mulling everything over at home, Vini wondered if defeating demons would be the main way unicorns would bring good into the world. And when thinking of the unicorn killing so many demons at once in the meadow, Vini remembered reading in the bible that a single angel had killed one hundred and eighty-five thousand Assyrian soldiers in one night, and she wondered if the power of unicorns might be almost equal to that of angels.

However, as fascinating as unicorn power was to think about, Vini's brain more pondered the perplexity as to exactly what had made the unicorn appear. Had the creature come in response to danger, or had she called it? She was almost afraid at this time to try to call one again using the bracketed bible verses, or even just by praying for one to appear. What if people who could summon unicorns were only supposed to do so in times of crisis, and not just on a whim? Except that Vini hadn't even realized that she was in a crisis in the meadow.

But if it was true that hope, joy, and peace were needed to summon unicorns; then, if Vini wasn't in the right state of mind, the unicorn might not come, even if she went through all twelve of the passages and prayed very hard for one to appear. Even after two encounters, it seemed there was no end to the mystery of unicorns, not only their exact purposes, but also what exactly might make them show up. She also wondered if perhaps believing was the key because, in the meadow, just before it happened, she had actually sort of expected a unicorn to appear. Surrender, she felt sure was important too—handing everything over to God to manage, and just following His lead.

But brainpower is probably important too, Vini thought, remembering a theory she had come across in a book several months back that was somewhat related to what Mrs. Doyle had said about the unused portion of the brain. If the idea was that certain human beings have it within them to summon unicorns, then perhaps the bible verses simply put us in the right frame of mind, with right thinking. If our thoughts are more in line with what God intends, since we are supposed to become more like His Son during our lifetimes, perhaps that's all it might take for our brains to call a unicorn.

Whatever the truth, she somehow felt confident and reassured in the very core of her being that if she needed a unicorn again, she would be able to call one.

Realizing that, at this point, she could probably think endlessly on this issue without reaching any perfectly correct conclusions, Vini pulled herself out of speculation mode to simply recall the wonder of her latest encounter with a unicorn. This one had been quite different than the first. The eyes, for one thing, she suddenly remembered. The meadow unicorn didn't have blue eyes like the first. But the eyes had still been familiar, in the same way that the first unicorn's eyes had looked familiar. With this, a picture of Mrs. Doyle's smiling face suddenly sprang to mind, and Vini realized that the second unicorn had eyes resembling those of her former employer. And the first one had eyes that looked a lot like her late grandfather's!

So unicorns might be a sort of conduit for departed souls, she thought, in remembering Mrs. Doyle's notes. And Vini was almost certain she was right. How amazing!

In also considering the thoughts she had received, to shield her eyes and look away, then that it was safe to look again, she wondered if it was the unicorn telling her this, or God, or perhaps Tulko. The voice in her head hadn't been clearly recognizable as an actual voice. However, she didn't think it likely that it was Tulko because his thoughts seemed slightly different, softer, more suggestive, and less direct than the forcefulness behind the clear voice she had heard in the meadow. She could almost compare Tulko's thoughts to a hum in her head, while the meadow voice was more like the sharpness of the ring of a bell.

Whoever it was, Vini was sure the voice had been friend rather than foe because the messages had sounded and felt much different than the thoughts Satan and his followers often planted, thoughts full of lies and deception, containing underlying tones of doubt, guilt, anger, and mistrust.

Remembering Dave Nichols from the Thanksgiving party, Vini met him again the next Saturday morning as he was just getting settled in with his wife at the mansion.

After cleaning a bit, and helping Sam with some weeding in the garden, Vini was just heading down to the subbasement library when she heard the hall clock chime. Listening closely, she heard fifteen

chimes, when she knew it was only eleven o'clock. Since she had been planning to pick another journal or two from the shelf, she felt this might be a message as to which one to pick. Though the journals were not labeled with numbers, she counted left to right to select the fifteenth in the row. She then settled herself into one of the recliners to read for a while.

Amazingly, the journal described how Mrs. Doyle and her husband during their travels had found the zippered bible with the specific verses marked in brackets and had been told by God to keep it safe, which they did by placing the bible into the wooden box before secreting the box in the tunnel in Japan. Under God's further guidance, they bought the antique clock at an estate sale, planted the key to the wooden box inside it, left the clock at another estate sale minus its winding key, and then rented the mailbox into which they placed the clock key.

As the astounded Vini continued to read, she found another note indicating that Mrs. Doyle had been the one to send the blank sheet of stationery out in the bottle, also under God's direction. "And I wonder if the Vinsters might someday figure out that the stationery on the writing desk in my bedroom is an exact match. I stocked up because it's my favorite kind. And it might be plain looking, but it's actually a specialty item, good quality, and somewhat hard to find."

Again, Vini hadn't been very observant. But she now had a clear picture in her mind of the box of cream-colored stationery with scalloped edges on the writing desk that she had actually picked up several times while dusting.

In another entry near the end of the journal Mrs. Doyle stated that she could see God's hand in everything, in her whole life, and that it was extremely satisfying to see certain things coming full circle. "The Vinsters can now carry on with everything. There might be danger, but I'm sure she's up to the task. I think there's a lion inside her, or maybe a unicorn, or possibly both."

In sending the bottle out again, Vini realized she had done something very like what Mrs. Doyle and her husband had done. *I need to remember to make a note of that in my own journal*, she told herself. Confident that the bottle would someday reach the specific person God intended it for, she thought leaving a record as to who sent it would be a good idea. Violet had found a whole box of blank journals, about

fifteen in all, in the downstairs library, and which she had given to Vini for her use, so she would have no shortage of writing space for quite some time to come.

Entries in Mrs. Doyle's journals occasionally referred to a cabinet in the library specifically made to hold large maps and charts, some of which marked locations of sightings of magical creatures not only by Mr. and Mrs. Doyle, but also by others. Many of the maps were of biblical importance because this was the research Mr. and Mrs. Doyle had been most concerned with, in being intent on finding a way to fix a world falling deeper into darkness.

Having brought back a couple of the journals she had taken home, so as not to have too many out of the safety of the library at once, she picked two more to borrow, letting her hand simply guide her in their selection. Just casually flipping through the ones she had chosen, she noticed they were filled with a lot of notes about dragons.

On Monday evening, Vini was excited to attend another youth group lecture at her church by Professor Fulhausen who was again talking on magical creatures, this time focusing on unicorns and firebirds. Some of his information on unicorns was in line with what Vini already knew, but he had a few interesting details to add.

“With unicorns being lion-like, if we consider that the lion is the king of all creatures, we might relate this symbolically to the King of kings, Jesus Himself. The horn is thought to symbolize ascension. Others think it represents Christ's side being pierced during crucifixion. But since it was something that was destined to happen, as part of God's plan, this still makes the unicorn a pure creature. But putting aside symbolism, the horn is the real mystery. People can speculate all they want about what it represents, but what does it actually do? What if it is a tool or device with which the creature can pierce the heavens, or tap into heavenly power, to somehow allow goodness to come into our world? Some scholars think the horn is something like a bridge between heaven and earth.”

When Professor Fulhausen was talking about firebirds, Vini found out that some people believe they are the key to finding dragons, which are thought to have healing as one of their powers. He also said some of his research indicated that dragons might have the task of keeping hellfire from overflowing. “Firebirds are thought to help keep the

unpredictable dragons in check,” he added, “and interestingly enough, firebirds are probably smaller than most people think, probably more the size of small falcons, like kestrels, or possibly even doves. But firebirds don’t have to be very big to catch the eye of a dragon, because dragons have very good eyesight.”

Vini smiled in knowing that firebirds were shapeshifting, able take on a variety of sizes. The mention of doves made Vini wonder if the five doves coming out of the sand dollar might relate more to firebirds than to anything else. Since firebirds were also related to God, she didn’t see why this couldn’t be possible.

That very night she had a dream in which she saw five doves of different colors sitting on the ground at the beginning of a path leading into a dense forest. One of the doves, of a shimmering crimson color, particularly caught her eye. At the exact moment that it took flight and headed down the path into the forest, Vini heard the same clear voice she had heard in the meadow inside her head telling her to follow the bird. Though it was late evening, nearing dark, Vini obeyed. With the dove in front of her flying slowly, almost as if in slow motion, she followed the winding path that was rather dark at times, but that felt comfortable and safe to her. After many twists and turns, which seemed to take about thirty minutes, Vini suddenly came to a clearing in which she was rather startled to find a gleaming reddish-gold dragon, about the size of a small house, towering over her and staring down at her.

The dream ended exactly there.

Believing the dream was a message, Vini told herself. *Now that I found unicorns, God probably wants me to find dragons next.*

Vini’s plan for the upcoming summer, which would begin in two weeks, definitely included more research, which she felt she could easily fit into her schedule. She would be working three full weeks at camp, then three weekends in a row to finish out the summer hippotherapy program. Charlie would be working at camp for pretty much the same amount of time as Vini, and the girls were looking forward to spending time together. Except for the first three weeks, Vini’s schedule of working at the mansion would be much like the previous summer, full time, because Violet and Dave wanted to take both a vacation and a trip to visit her aunt whom Violet was hoping she could persuade to come and live with her. Sam and Ben would be

working the full summer at the mansion and would help Vini act as caretaker during the time the couple was traveling.

In confidence, Violet shared with Vini something she and her husband were planning for the fall. “Dave and I are going to take in some foster kids,” she said.

“Mrs. Doyle would have liked that,” Vini said, smiling.

“The house is certainly big enough for a lot of kids,” Violet answered. “Since we never had any of our own, Dave and I recently started thinking about fostering. And now just seems like the right time in our lives. We haven’t told anyone else yet,” she added. “We’re trying to keep it somewhat low key because we don’t want to get our hopes up, in case, for some reason, we don’t qualify for the program.”

“I can’t see why you wouldn’t qualify,” Vini said. “You would be perfect foster parents, and the house is more than perfect for kids.”

Over the next couple of weeks, upon reading more of Mrs. Doyle’s journals, Vini found quite a few more notes on unicorns, including a particularly long one that she transferred into her own journal so she could have it handy when pondering the ongoing mystery surrounding the creatures.

“Maybe a unicorn is a person who achieved sanctification (became more Christlike) on earth and is then able to take on a purer form—that of a unicorn. Proverbs 8:17 says, “I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me.” Are we finding God when we find a unicorn? Is that why it’s so hard to find them because it’s hard for some people to find God? Do we have to be more sanctified to find them? Maybe only those able to achieve living nearly as perfectly as Christ lived can find them. We probably have to be more Christlike and closer to Him in likeness to see something so pure in form as a unicorn. Perhaps the unicorn is the manifestation of God in us that we create ourselves by becoming more like Him. Is that what the rest of our brain is for? We can see God if our hearts are pure. We will see evidence of Him in this world—His Works, His Influences, His Glory, His Magnificence, His Power. The unicorn has a pure heart and can always see Him; therefore, the unicorn can act as sort of a bridge between sinful man and God. But we can’t see Him if we’re looking in the wrong direction, down instead of up. The unicorn can connect us with

something better, and allow us to see a brighter future, something to live for if we finish this race according to His plan. As far as being able to see the good in bad situations, the purity of the unicorn is probably what allows the vision of the purity in the situation.”

On her way home from work on the day before she would be leaving for her three full weeks at camp, Vini stopped to say hello to Mr. Galloway who was working on a mermaid topiary. He had also started an octopus. “I thought the dolphins looked a little forlorn,” he told her.

Out of the corner of her eye, at a spot by Mr. Galloway’s garden shed, Vini caught a glimpse of Pizzo; and he was not alone. A girl puck troll was with him! She was wearing a little blue skirt and had braided hair. They were throwing tiny dirt clods at one another.

So Pizzo has a friend, Vini thought. Good for him.

Mr. Galloway was anxious to show Vini an old tree stump that he was sculpting with a chainsaw into a mass of flowers and vines. Vini was amazed at the amount of detail he could get into the wood using just a chainsaw.

“I’m thinking of doing a sleeping dragon topiary next,” Mr. Galloway told Vini, indicating a sprawling cluster of viburnum bushes.

Gazing in that direction, she could almost see a curled-up dragon, peacefully asleep, perhaps waiting patiently to be wakened to heal someone, or to be called into action to help keep hellfire from brimming over.

Another message, she thought. I believe I will definitely have to find a dragon, possibly soon.

As she was heading home, in thinking about Pizzo’s friend, Vini slightly wondered if puck trolls did something more than just admire artistic people. Perhaps the tiny creatures actually inspired artistry. Though he had probably always been artistic, Mr. Galloway certainly seemed to be becoming more so lately; perhaps the girl puck troll’s presence was helping this along.

All packed and ready to go for the next day, Vini went to bed slightly early. With the moon nearly full and the stars shining very brightly, she could see Louetta’s painting without using the flashlight.

I wonder how many people actually find hope, joy, and peace during their lifetimes?

Upon realizing that in her fairly short life so far, she had already firmly found all three, Vini gave thanks to God.

The next morning, she recorded in her journal something that had come to mind just before falling asleep, a simple statement to describe the soothing and happy feelings she got from the painting. *Like strokes of starlight painted on the heart.*

Vini would later discover in one of her late employer's journals that, after viewing one of Louetta's earlier paintings, Mrs. Doyle had written the exact same thing.



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