

Fourteen

Speaking of funny—when I walked into room 102 of the Good Night, Sleep Tight and said, “Granny, I have brought you two bologna sandwiches!” Granny did not say anything at all.

I expected her to curse the very existence of bologna. Or to tell me that she was not hungry.

But Granny said nothing.

“Granny?” I said.

I went over to the bed. I pulled back the covers.

Granny was not there!

I have never been so surprised in my life.

“Granny?” I said in a very loud voice.

I looked in the bathroom. I looked under the bed.

And then I ran out of room 102 and looked for the car.

And guess what? It was gone!

I went back into the room and saw that Granny’s plaid suitcase was not on her luggage rack. I felt dizzy. The whole room was spinning. I couldn’t breathe.

Where would Granny go without me? I was the reason for her existence. She had told me so many times. She said that what kept her alive was looking out for me and teaching me to make the most of my gifts.

I bent over and put my hands on my knees. I took deep breaths. I looked around the spinning room.

And that is when I saw it.

An envelope.

With my name on it.

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Inside the envelope, there were several folded-up pieces of paper.

I unfolded them very, very slowly.

Dear Louisiana.

Those were the words written at the top of the first page.

It was a letter.

Granny had written me a letter.

She had never before written me a letter.

And why in the world would she write me a letter? From the very first minute of my life that I could recall, Granny was with me and I was with her.

Why would you write someone a letter when you were always and forever by their side?

You wouldn't.

Unless, of course, you intended not to be by their side anymore.

I opened the palm-tree curtains and sat down on the bed and stared out the window. I heard

a rustling. Was it wings? Was Clarence the crow somewhere nearby? Had he come to save me?

And then, my goodness, I realized that the rustling was the letter. My hand was trembling, and the pages of the letter were brushing up against each other.

It was at this point that I understood that a tragedy was in the process of occurring.

The sky outside the window of the Good Night, Sleep Tight was blue-black, and the curtains had palm trees instead of peaches, and Granny was gone, and I could feel the world whizzing past me.

I once had a teacher named Mrs. McGregor who said that the world was turning very slowly on its axis.

"It is moving infinitesimally," said Mrs. McGregor.

Infinitesimally.

She said the word very slowly. She stretched it out—in-fin-it-esss-i-mally—so that you could hear the *infinite* in the word when she said it.

Mrs. McGregor always had dried spit in the corner of her mouth, but she was a very patient woman and she was a truthful person. I liked Mrs. McGregor. I could not imagine her telling a lie.

But here is the thing: It did not feel to me like the earth was moving infinitesimally. It felt like it was hurtling and jerking its way through a lonely darkness.

To my way of thinking, you never knew when the earth was going to lurch and go somewhere entirely unexpected. There was nothing infinitesimal about it.

I guess that is what the curse of sundering will do to you if it has been placed upon your head—it will change how the earth itself moves.

Oh, Raymie and Beverly.

Oh, Archie and Buddy.

Oh, Granny.

I looked down at the letter in my trembling hands.

I started to read.

Fifteen

Dear Louisiana, I read. You must be brave.

Well, that first sentence made me mad.

I was tired of being brave. Just like I was tired
of imposing and persevering.

But I went on reading.

*I am going to tell you some things you must
know, that perhaps you should have known all along.*

I could feel my heart sink all the way down
to my toes.

I knew it. I knew that this was a letter of good-bye; I could tell. It was almost more than I could bear.

But I had to bear it, didn't I? What choice did I have?

I read on.

I know that you know the story of the curse, but what I have never told you is that I saw my father that night—the night that he sawed my mother in half and walked away without putting her back together again.

I was standing at the window of the hotel room. I was waiting for the two of them to return from the theater. I was up late, later than I should have been. I looked out the window of the hotel room, and I saw my father walking down the street toward the hotel. He was alone. His magician's cloak was floating out behind him. And I knew, suddenly, that he was going to tell me something important, but I did not know what it was. I could not imagine, you see. I could not imagine.

My father stopped and looked up at the window

of the hotel. I waved at him. He looked at me, and then he turned and walked away without saying anything to me at all.

And that moment, when my father left without telling me anything, is the moment when the curse truly began.

That was the true moment of sundering.

I closed my eyes. I could see small Granny, young Granny, standing at the window of the hotel room watching her father turn and walk away from her. It made my heart hurt. Poor Granny.

At least she had all her teeth then.

I read on.

In these last few days, my father has appeared to me again and again. In Florida, I woke from a dream of him calling my name (speaking to me at last!), and I knew then that we must go to Elf Ear immediately. That is why we left in such haste, Louisiana. I felt as if I was being summoned.

And now every time I close my eyes, I see him, my father. He appears out of the fog of my mind

and he calls my name and his tone is ominous. It has become clear to me what I must do. I must go and confront the curse. I must do it alone.

Was it a good idea for a toothless, feverish Granny to go and confront the curse by herself? Without me? Well, I did not think so. But then, Granny wasn't soliciting my opinion, was she?

I don't know what I will find in Elf Ear, Louisiana. I don't know what darkness awaits me, but I know that I must keep you safe from it.

I wish that I could say good-bye to you in person, but I fear that you would insist on coming with me; worse, I fear that I would not have the courage to go.

And I must go.

Oh, I do not want to leave you as my father left me. I want you to know that you are loved. I want to tell you the truth of who you are.

Brace yourself, Louisiana.

I looked up. I stared at the palm-tree curtains and the dark world outside. I braced myself.

Your parents were never known to me.

“What?” I said out loud. I looked around room 102. “What are you talking about, Granny? Of course my parents were known to you. My parents were the Flying Elefantes. They were famous far and wide. They were beautiful and talented. You have told me so many times.”

You and I are not related at all, Louisiana. We were tossed together by the winds of fate. Your parents were not the Flying Elefantes. They were not trapeze artists. I do not know who your parents were. That is a mystery I will not be able to unravel for you.

Something large and dark had entered room 102 of the Good Night, Sleep Tight, and the large, dark thing was sitting right on top of my chest. I could not breathe.

If my parents were not the Flying Elefantes, then who was I?

“Read on,” whispered the dark thing on my chest. “Read on.”

After the curse befell me, I was sent to the county home. And after the county home, after I

survived that miserable, miserable place, I entered the world as an adult; I moved through it as a solitary being, and I did not mind at all. I was glad to be alone. Yes, glad. For if you are alone, then you do not need to worry about the curse of sundering.

I had a certain musical gift; when I was very young, my mother had taught me to play the piano. And so that is what I did. I played the piano at churches. I gave recitals and lessons. And I worked at other jobs, small jobs—clerking, typing, cashiering.

I got by.

Listen, Louisiana, listen. Now we come to you. When I lived in New Orleans, I worked for a time at the Louisiana Five-and-Dime.

I sat up straight.

The dark thing on my chest sat up straight, too, but it did not go away from me.

One evening, I walked out into the alley and I heard the whimper of a small animal.

I knew what was coming.

“Read,” the dark thing said. “Read.”

I read.

It was you, Louisiana.

*You were impossibly small. You were wrapped
in a flowered blanket. Someone had put you on top of
a pile of cardboard boxes and left you there.*

*Understand, I had never wanted a child. I had
no need to rescue anyone.*

But I picked you up. And you smiled at me.

You smiled, Louisiana.

*I knew what it meant to be abandoned, left
behind.*

*I knew, too, what would happen if I notified
the authorities. I knew that you would go to the
orphanage, to a county home.*

I could not let that happen.

*So this is the truth. These are the facts: I picked
you up. You smiled at me. I named you for where you
were found, and caring for you has been the greatest
joy of my life.*

I was named after a five-and-dime?

I was not an Elefante?

Someone had left me in an alley?

I couldn't breathe.

I would give anything to stay here with you, but the curse will not be denied. See how it is even now doing its dark work and pulling us apart? Please understand: I am old and I am very unwell and I fear there is little time left to me.

My father will not stop calling my name!

I must go and face the curse! I will try to return, but in case something prevents me, in case my time is too short, I want to tell you this: do not come after me. The curse is too dangerous!

I wish that I had time to see you to safety, but you are wily, resilient. You are not alone in the world. You will find a way. And please remember this: someone put you down in that alley, but I picked you up. And perhaps what matters when all is said and done is not who puts us down but who picks us up.

I have loved you with the whole of myself, Louisiana. You will always and forever be loved by me. I have gone to Elf Ear to set us both free.

Do not forget that you can sing.

I love you.

Sixteen

Get off me,” I said to the dark thing on my chest. “Please get off me.”

But it did not move.

I stood up. I kept hold of the letter. I picked up the bologna sandwiches, and I staggered out of room 102.

I went into the office of the Good Night, Sleep Tight, because I did not know where else to go. Bernice was behind the counter. A tragedy was occurring, the darkness had descended, and

Granny was gone, but Bernice's hair was still in curlers.

Here is something I have learned: you should never expect help from someone who perpetually has their hair in curlers.

But what was I to do? Where could I turn?

I didn't even know who I was.

"Good evening," I said to Bernice.

"What now?" said Bernice.

I guess that it was just impossible for her to be a friendly person, no matter how hard she tried.

Not that she was trying.

"I am wondering if you have seen my granny recently and if she gave you any information," I said.

"Seen your granny?" said Bernice. "What information? Don't tell me your granny is missing."

"She is not missing," I said.

"Then why are you looking for her?" said Bernice. She narrowed her eyes.

I narrowed my eyes back at her, but the dark thing was still on my chest and it was very hard for me to breathe.

I turned away from Bernice. I bent over and put my hands on my knees. I closed my eyes and concentrated on breathing.

Who am I? Who am I?

That was the question my heart kept beating out.

When I opened my eyes, I saw the alligator staring at me. He was an incredibly ferocious-looking alligator, but he also seemed perplexed—as if he were thinking, *How in the world did a dangerous man-eating alligator like me end up dead in the office of the Good Night, Sleep Tight motel?*

There is something very sad about contemplating a perplexed stuffed alligator when it is dark outside and you do not know who you are or who your parents were or anything about yourself at all.

“What are you doing?” said Bernice.

Well, yes. That was the question, wasn't it?

"I am communing with the alligator," I said.

"Oh," said Bernice. "You're communing with the alligator. Of course you are. I suppose next you'll be speaking with the vending machine. And that reminds me. Let me tell you something about Burke Allen and that vending machine. He makes little quarter-shaped pieces of metal down at that machine shop of his father's, and then he puts the metal into the vending machine and takes what he wants without paying for a thing. That is theft. That is a crime."

Burke!

Burke Allen, who gave me two sandwiches when I had only asked for one.

Burke Allen, who had a crow named Clarence.

I could feel the dark thing on top of me lifting up, peeling away. Burke Allen would help me. Burke Allen would know what to do.

I stood up straight. I turned around and faced Bernice.

“Thank you very much,” I said.

Even though she had not helped me with anything at all.

“Be polite up to the last minute. Be polite until they absolutely force you not to be.” That was what the woman named Granny always advised.

I left the Good Night, Sleep Tight office and I did not look back.

Seventeen

How hard could it be to find a pink house in the woods?

Well, it turned out to be harder than I expected.

To begin with, it was dark and I could not see where I was going. And there were trees everywhere and tall grass and mean bushes. Also, it was unnecessarily windy.

Something was flying over my head, and I do not think it was a bird.

Under the best of circumstances, I have never been able to tell one direction from another. And these were not the best of circumstances.

I kept hoping that Clarence would appear and lead me to the pink house and to Burke Allen. In the story of Pinocchio, Pinocchio is lost and walking through the woods and a blind cat and a lame fox come along and tell him a lot of lies.

I made up my mind that I was not going to listen to anyone who told me lies.

Of course, thinking about lies made me think about Granny.

That is, I thought about the woman who I had once believed to be my granny, even though she was absolutely no relation of mine.

I can tell you one thing: whoever she was, she was certainly a big old liar!

I was never ever going to speak to her again, and I hoped that she remained toothless until the end of time.

Oh, I was mad.

And also, I was lost.

And then I fell into a hole.

It was not a deep hole. And that was fortunate. But it was deep enough to make me lose my balance and fall to the ground and drop the letter and the bologna sandwiches.

I stood up. My ankle hurt. So I went back down on my hands and knees, and I crawled around in the dark woods looking for the letter and the sandwiches.

And because it was dark, it was hard to find anything.

And my goodness, I was lonely. I almost wished that a blind cat and a lame fox would show up, even if they were just going to tell me lies. It would be nice to have some company.

I crawled around some more and found both bologna sandwiches. That was a good thing.

But I could not find the letter. The wind had taken it away. It was gone, gone, gone.

Just like Granny.

I started to cry.

I cried and cried. But since who knew what was going to happen next (I certainly had no idea) and since it seemed like a good idea to keep my strength up in such a dark and windy world, I ate one bologna sandwich, and then I ate the other one.

I cried the whole time I ate them.

Both sandwiches were very good.

Imagine Granny lying to me about bologna!

She should have put something in her letter apologizing for all the lies she had told me—including the lies about bologna.

And then I remembered that Granny was not my granny and that I had lost the letter informing me of that fact.

I stood up, but it still hurt to stand on my ankle, so I went back down on my hands and knees and I crawled over the ground looking

for the stupid letter. I started to cry harder and louder. It was very hard to breathe, and everything smelled like bologna and a little bit like orange cheese.

The world was so dark! I don't know that I had ever before encountered such darkness.

So you can imagine how surprised I was when a bright light shone out of the darkness and a voice said, "What in the Sam Hill?"

I stared into the light. I said, "I am looking for a letter and a pink house and a boy named Burke Allen."

And then I fainted.

The next thing I remember is being carried.

I smelled something sweet.

I said, "What is that smell?"

A man's voice answered me. He said, "That's cake, darling."

I liked that answer very much. I think that "cake" is a very good word in general and that

people should use it as an answer to questions more often.

“Darling” is a nice word, too.

The cake smell got stronger and sweeter, and then I saw the pink house. And I was so happy that I must have passed out again.

Just from sheer joy.

Eighteen

When I opened my eyes, I was on a red-flowered couch and three faces were looking down at me. One of the faces belonged to Burke Allen.

“She ain’t no bigger than a minute,” said a man with very short gray hair.

“Her name is Louisiana Elefante,” said Burke.
“And her mama and daddy was trapeze artists.”

“I thought she was some kind of wounded animal,” said the third person. He looked just like Burke, except older. His hair was blond,

too, and cut just the same as Burke's and the old man's.

"I thought maybe she was a bobcat," said the blond man, who was surely Burke's father. "She was wailing like a bobcat."

"There ain't no more bobcats in them woods," said the gray-haired man.

"I know that, Daddy," said Burke's father. "I'm saying that's what she sounded like."

"Well, she ain't no bigger than a minute."

"You already said that, Grandpap," said Burke.

"I'm saying it again, ain't I?"

"You are all Burke Allens," I said, because it was just now making sense to me. One Burke Allen was the father and the other Burke Allen was the grandfather, and the final Burke Allen was my Burke Allen.

Burke looked down at me and smiled. "Hey, Louisiana," he said.

I stuck my hand up and waved at him.

“Hey,” said Burke again. “How do you feel?”

“I feel strange,” I said.

“Maybe it’s that old curse,” said Burke.

“What curse?” said the grandfather.

“There’s a curse upon her head,” said Burke.

“Now, son,” said Burke’s father, “don’t go making things up.”

“I ain’t making it up,” said Burke. “She told it all to me.”

“Where is Clarence?” I said.

No one answered me.

The cake smell was very strong. The couch was flowered. Did I say that already? My ankle hurt, but not much. I felt like I was floating on a flowered, cake-scented cloud.

Maybe I was in heaven.

“Granny” didn’t believe in heaven. But that didn’t mean I had to not believe, did it?

Maybe I came from a long line of believers. Who could say?

In any case, the cake smelled very, very good.

“What kind of cake is that I smell?” I said to Burke.

And then there was a woman coming toward us. She had big blond hair. She was smiling at me. She didn’t look a thing like the Blue Fairy, but she smiled the same way the Blue Fairy smiled. She was wiping her hands on a striped dish towel.

She said, “Honey, that is my famous chocolate-chocolate cake.”

Burke said, “Mama is making seventeen cakes.”

“Seventeen?” I said.

“Seventeen,” she said.

Seventeen cakes!

The room spun around.

“Burke,” I said, “I don’t know who I am.”

“You’re Louisiana,” he said.

“Did she hit her head?” said his mother.

“There’s a letter,” I said. I tried to sit up, but I felt dizzy, and I immediately lay back down.

"The letter explains everything. Actually, it doesn't explain anything at all. And besides, the letter is gone, blown by the wind into the lands of no return."

"How's that?" said the grandfather. "The lands of what?"

"We'll find it," said Burke.

"I don't want to see that letter ever again," I said. I started to cry.

"She's crying," said Burke.

"I see that, son," said Burke's father.

"Hey, now," said the grandfather. He took hold of my hand, and his hand was so rough and callused and oversized that it was like holding on to a horse hoof. I cried harder.

I had never held hands with a horse before.

"Thought she was a bobcat," said Burke's father.

"No bigger than a minute," said the grandfather. He squeezed my hand with his horse hoof. It hurt, but it was comforting, too.

“Burke,” I said, “Granny is gone.”

“Gone?” said Burke.

“Gone,” I said.

The world smelled so sweet.

I thought I would just close my eyes.

Nineteen

When I woke up, it was morning and the sun was shining and I was in a bed and covered by a big fluffy quilt.

There was a nightstand next to the bed. On top of the nightstand, there was a lamp with flowers painted all over the shade. And beside the lamp, there was a red plate with a biscuit on it. And the biscuit had some ham in the middle of it!

This was exciting because I was very hungry.
I sat up.

There was a glass of orange juice on the
nightstand, too. And there was a note.

The note said:

Honey, here is some breakfast. I thought you
should go on sleeping. Burke is at school, and Burke's
daddy and granddaddy are at Burke Allen Machinery.
I am at Maribelle's salon. I will call and check on
you at lunchtime. Don't worry about a thing.

From your friend, Betty Allen.

It was the nicest letter I had ever received.

It was certainly nicer than what Granny had
written to me in her letter.

"Granny"—that person I did not know at
all, that person I was not even related to.

I heard a tapping against the window. I
looked up, and guess who it was?

Clarence the crow! He was sitting on Burke's
shoulder and leaning forward and tapping the
window with his beak. Oh, I wished I had a
crow to sit on my shoulder and tap on windows!

I just knew it would change my whole life for the better.

Burke was smiling and waving at me. I waved back at him, but my heart was heavy. What was I going to do? I couldn't imagine.

I truly couldn't.

Burke and Clarence disappeared, and there was nothing outside the window except trees and woods and a cloudy sky. Granny's letter was blowing around out there somewhere in that world.

Well, I hoped those pages blew as far away from me as possible. I hoped those words of hers were blown by the winds of fate all the way to China.

That's what I hoped.

And speaking of being blown by the winds of fate, where was I going to go? What would become of me? I could not seem to escape the curse of sundering.

Burke walked into the room, still smiling, and I looked into his blue eyes, and that is when

I recalled his words from the day before about finding a magician who could undo the curse.

And then I remembered the sign on Reverend Obertask's door:

MINISTER'S OFFICE
REVEREND FRANK OBERTASK
ASSISTANCE, ADVICE, HEALING WORDS

Wasn't a minister like a magician?

Weren't healing words like a spell?

Maybe Reverend Obertask knew some healing words that could undo the curse!

I didn't need that Granny person to undo the curse. And besides, I was finished entirely with counting on her. I would just get it done myself. I would get everything done myself.

"Do you know where the Happy Shepherd Church is?" I said to Burke.

"The Good Shepherd?"

"Yes. That one."

"Sure, I know where it is. Why?"

"We need to go there."

"What for?" said Burke.

"Because I am going to take action," I said.

"Don't you want to find the letter you was talking about last night?" said Burke.

"I do not," I said. "I don't care if I ever see that letter again."

"Also, last night you said your granny was gone."

"That doesn't matter, either," I said, "because I have a plan."

"All right," said Burke.

I picked up the ham biscuit and took a bite, and my goodness, it was delicious.

"Aren't you supposed to be in school?" I said to Burke.

Burke shrugged. "I skipped. I skip all the time. It don't matter. What do I need school for? You don't need school to join the circus."

Outside the window, I could see Clarence. He was looking at us, cocking his head first one way and then the other. I thought, *Wouldn't it be*

nice to be a bird and to have feathers and not to have a care in the world?

But Clarence probably had cares.

Because that is what it means to be alive on this infinitesimally spinning planet. It means you have cares.

Doesn't it?

“Why are you limping like that?” said Burke.

We were walking into town.

“Because in a tragic moment of darkness and despair, I fell into a hole,” I said.

“Oh,” said Burke.

We walked over train tracks. Clarence kept flying ahead of us and then flying back, looking down and laughing.

“This is where I seen the circus,” said Burke. He stopped walking. “Right here. I was sitting on my grandpap’s shoulders. I was—I don’t know—maybe six years old. We watched the whole circus go by on the train. The giraffes

had their heads sticking up out of the boxcar. There was lions, too. Two of them. You could smell them. They was pacing back and forth in a cage. And there was this clown. His face was all painted up, and he waved at me. And that is when I decided that I was going to join up with the circus.”

“If you join the circus, you have to travel all the time,” I said. “You have to leave everyone behind. The circus is just one long good-bye.”

“How do you know?” said Burke. “And besides, I want to go out there and travel all over and see everything there is to see. I can always come back home if I want to.”

“If I had a mother who was baking seventeen cakes, I would want to stay right where I was,” I said.

“Yeah, well. Them cakes ain’t for me. They’re for the carnival, for the World-Famous Betty Allen Cake Raffle.”

“I have never heard of the World-Famous Betty Allen Cake Raffle.”

“Shoot. You haven’t? I tell you what—people come from all over Georgia just to try and win one of Mama’s cakes.”

For the rest of the way into town, Burke Allen told me all about the World-Famous Betty Allen Cake Raffle and how Miss Lulu played piano music before each raffle number was called and how one year a woman was so excited about winning that she fainted dead away when Betty Allen called her number.

It sounded fascinating. Except for the part where Miss Lulu played piano. That was not fascinating at all.

“Is there a limit to how many cakes you can win?” I asked.

“It’s a game of chance,” said Burke. “There don’t got to be a limit, because it ain’t nothing but chance.”

I thought that I would have to tell Granny about the World-Famous Betty Allen Cake Raffle, because it was exactly the kind of activity she would be interested in. Imagine winning a

whole cake! And then I remembered that Granny was gone, that she had left me. And that she was not my granny at all.

Was I ever going to get used to the fact that I had been lied to and abandoned?

Well, I just could not say.

All I knew was that my heart was broken into several hundred pieces, and I was walking along beside Burke Allen and dreaming of cakes as if the world were a normal place.

Clarence was flying ahead of us, his wings shining in the light.

The world spins on, just as Mrs. McGregor said it does. It spins infinitesimally, and it never, ever stops.

Somewhere up above us, Clarence laughed. I couldn't see him.

But I could hear him laughing.

We walked past Bill's Taxidermy. And we walked past Dr. Fox's office. I thought about Mrs. Ivy

sitting at her desk typing out a bill and sending it to a person and an address that did not exist, and that made me happy.

“Down that road is Burke Allen Machinery,” said Burke. “That’s where Grandpap and Daddy are right now. Working on machinery. That’s what they do all ding-danging day long. They like working on machinery.

“And right there is the church,” he said, pointing. “You see it?”

“Yes,” I said. “I see it.”

“Me and Clarence will wait for you in the woods. I got to keep a low profile. I can’t let nobody see me skipping school.”

And so I walked into the Happy Shepherd by myself.

I walked up the stairs, and there was Reverend Obertask’s office, just where I remembered it being, just where I had left it.

I knocked on the door.

No one answered. I turned the knob and

opened the door and, my goodness, there he was: Reverend Obertask.

He was asleep. His feet were on the desk, and he was tipped back in his chair with his big arms hanging down on either side of him. His glasses were crooked on his face, and his mouth was open, and his face was covered in whiskers.

Reverend Obertask looked very much like a walrus and not one bit like a magician.

The Georgia sun was shining into the office. It was lighting up all of Reverend Obertask—his nose and his sideburns and his mustache.

I stared at him, and then I stared directly into the light. It occurred to me that the Georgia sun was different from the Florida sun. I knew that it was the same sun—of course I did. There is only one sun, no matter where you go on this infinitesimally spinning earth. That is a fact.

But there are facts and there are facts. And one fact is that it is the same sun, and another

fact is that if you are far from home, and you don't know who you are, it is a very different sun.

I was standing there thinking all of that when I noticed that Reverend Obertask had a pipe in his right hand.

And the pipe was dangling so low that it was almost touching the carpet.

Reverend Obertask, the walrus-magician, was going to inadvertently set fire to the Sweet Shepherd Church!

Twenty

I went very quickly and very stealthily into the office.

“Reverend Obertask?” I said.

He made a little snorting noise.

And then he dropped his pipe.

Dropped it!

I immediately bent down and picked up the pipe, thereby averting a gigantic and tragic church fire. In the meantime, Reverend Obertask slept blissfully on.

I was standing there, holding the pipe and staring at Reverend Obertask, when who to my wondering eyes should appear?

Miss Lulu.

Of course.

She was standing right at the entrance to the office. She had her hands on her hips. "What in the world is going on?" she said in a very loud voice.

Well, that has never been an easy question for me to answer in any situation because so much goes on in this world.

I stared at Miss Lulu and her curls. I smelled caramel. Did she have an unlimited supply of caramel candies?

"I am unsure exactly what you are referring to," I said. "And I do not care for your implications."

"I just bet you don't!" shouted Miss Lulu.

And then Reverend Obertask woke up.

"Harrrrruummmpph," he said. "Must have drifted off."

“Well,” said Miss Lulu, “explain yourself.”

“Just a midmorning nap, Miss Lulu,” said Reverend Obertask. He took his feet off the desk and put them on the floor. “I don’t know that it can really be explained beyond that—just a middle-aged man trying his best to make his way through this vale of tears.”

“I was talking to the child,” said Miss Lulu. “The one who is holding your pipe.”

“My pipe?” said Reverend Obertask. He blinked.

I stood up straighter.

I said, “Hello, Reverend Obertask. Here it is. Your pipe.” I held up the pipe. “I came in here to ask for assistance and advice, and also to make some inquiries about your healing and magic words, but you dropped your pipe, and I picked it up so that there would not be some tragic fire. I did not want the Tiny Shepherd Church to go up in flames.”

“My healing and magic words?” said Reverend Obertask. “What tiny shepherd?” He

blinked again. He was a man with a very round and very surprised face. Also, he had a great deal of facial hair.

“I hate to say this —” said Miss Lulu.

“I would advise against saying it, then,” said Reverend Obertask.

But there was no stopping Miss Lulu.

“I think she was intending to steal your pipe,” she said.

“I was not intending to steal your pipe!” I said. I stamped my foot. “I do not need a pipe!”

Miss Lulu said, “Be that as it may. The child and her grandmother are staying at the Good Night, Sleep Tight. They are just passing through—if you understand my meaning. The child sings. And she is engaged to sing at the Elkhorn funeral tomorrow. But I’m worried that something, uh, untoward is occurring. Or will occur.”

“Untoward?” said Reverend Obertask.

“Exactly,” said Miss Lulu.

“Thank you very much, Miss Lulu,” said

Reverend Obertask. He sat up straighter. His chair creaked. "You may leave us."

"But, Reverend," said Miss Lulu. "The child has your pipe."

"Yes, she does," said Reverend Obertask.

Miss Lulu sighed a very large sigh. The smell of caramel drifted across the room.

"I will take it from here, Miss Lulu," said Reverend Obertask. "Thank you for your generous insights and kind intervention. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Miss Lulu," I said. It was a sentence that I liked saying very much, so I said it again. "Good-bye, Miss Lulu."

"Yes, good-bye," said Reverend Obertask. "And please close the door behind you."

Miss Lulu stood there with her mouth hanging open and her curls holding themselves very still. And then she pulled the door closed in a huffy and important way, and I was alone with Reverend Obertask, the walrus who could maybe perform magic.

I was certainly in need of magic.

Outside the window, I could see a crow sitting in the crook of a live oak.

I hoped it was Clarence.

It is a nice thing to believe that a crow is watching over you.

“So,” said Reverend Obertask.

“So,” I said. “Here is your pipe.”

Reverend Obertask reached forward and took the pipe from my hand very gently. “Thank you,” he said. “You didn’t tell me your name.”

“Louisiana Elefante.”

It was the first time I had said that name since I had learned the truth about myself, and I must say that the words felt strange in my mouth—heavy and dark.

“Are you of Spanish extraction?” said Reverend Obertask.

“I have absolutely no idea,” I said. “The sad fact is that my parents are entirely unknown to me.”

It was strange to say those words, too. Always, before, my parents had been crystal clear in my

mind—golden, shimmery, beautiful. But now when I thought of them, no image appeared. There was nothing but darkness, and that was sad, because before there had been so much brightness.

“I used to believe that my parents were trapeze artists known as the Flying Elefantes,” I said to Reverend Obertask. “But it turns out that I don’t know who they were or what they did.”

Oh, I felt hollow inside.

Reverend Obertask nodded. He said, “I see.” His chair creaked once, twice, and then the office was very quiet. I could see dust motes dancing around joyfully in the air.

What do dust motes have to be so happy about?

Reverend Obertask cleared his throat. He said, “So you were adopted, I presume?”

“It is a long and tragic story full of dark alleys and twists and turns and many unexpected happenings,” I said. “And also curses. There are curses in the story.”

“Curses,” said Reverend Obertask.

“Yes,” I said, “curses. Do you know much about curses?”

“I’m afraid I don’t.”

“But you’re a minister,” I said.

“I am,” said Reverend Obertask. “However, my day-to-day interactions tend to deal more with garden-variety issues—the loss of hope, the combating of despair, the balm of forgiveness, the need to understand, the short tempers and distrustful natures of church organists. That sort of thing. It’s not often that curses come up.”

Out in the sanctuary, Miss Lulu started to play the organ. There was one huge crashing chord. And then a long silence. And then came another huge crashing chord.

“I think she is frustrated sometimes,” said Reverend Obertask. He smiled. “We all push against our limitations, don’t we?”

I liked Reverend Obertask. I liked his smile. I liked his walrus face.

I thought that maybe he was the kind of person who would understand how it felt to sit in a motel room and stare at state-inappropriate curtains and know that you are all alone in the world.

"I have a curse upon my head," I told him. "And I was hoping that you could undo it."

"Alas," said Reverend Obertask, "I do not think that I can undo your curse. I wish that I could."

The sun went behind a cloud. I heard Clarence laughing. I heard Reverend Obertask breathing.

I stood there. I worked hard not to cry.

"Does this curse have to do with your parents?" said Reverend Obertask in a very quiet voice.

"It is a curse of sundering," I said, "so, yes, I suppose it does, because my parents left me in an alley, behind a five-and-dime."

Reverend Obertask nodded. He said, "What a terrible thing."

And it was a terrible thing, wasn't it?

It was a relief to hear somebody call it what it was: terrible.

"How could they do that?" I said. "How could they just leave me? What kind of people would do that? I don't understand."

Reverend Obertask shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "I don't understand, either."

I have to say that Reverend Obertask was turning out to be something of a disappointment. He couldn't undo curses. He couldn't explain things.

From the sanctuary came the sound of Miss Lulu playing Bach on the organ. Or attempting to play Bach on the organ.

I did not understand how someone could play the organ so poorly, just as I did not understand how someone could have a seemingly lifetime supply of caramels and not share them.

There was so much I did not understand.

The sun came out from behind a cloud, and

then it went back again — light, dark, light, dark.

I felt very sad.

I said, “I thought you would be able to help me. I thought you would have some kind of magic. On your door, it says that you dispense healing words.”

“I can listen to you, Louisiana Elefante,” said Reverend Obertask. “That is the only magic I have. Do you want to tell me the rest of your story?”

Reverend Obertask leaned back in his chair, and it let out another creak. The dust motes danced around cheerfully. Miss Lulu continued to abuse Mr. Bach.

“I have a question for you,” I said.

“I will do my best to answer it,” said Reverend Obertask.

“Do you know the story of Pinocchio?” I said.

“I do.”

“Well, then you will know that Pinocchio

gets separated from his father at the beginning of the book and spends the whole entire story separated from him until they meet up again in the belly of a whale.”

“Yes,” said Reverend Obertask.

“Will I spend the whole entire story of my life separated from the people I love?”

Reverend Obertask blinked. He said, “I don’t know, Louisiana. I can’t see into the future. I do think that, more often than not, love has a way of finding us.”

I looked into Reverend Obertask’s sad walrus face.

It was the second time that I had stood in Reverend Obertask’s office and come to the realization that I was all on my own.

“It is a good and healing thing to tell your story,” said Reverend Obertask. “So if you don’t want to finish telling it to me, maybe you can find someone you trust to tell it to. Either way, I hope you will come and visit me again.”

Poor ineffectual Reverend Obertask.

“Perhaps I will visit you again,” I said, just to cheer him up.

He smiled at me.

And I smiled back at him, but I did not use all of my teeth because, oh, my heart was heavy.

Twenty-one

Burke and I were in the woods. We were sitting together under a tree, and Clarence was somewhere where I could not see or hear him. But I knew he was there because he did not ever go too far away from Burke. And that was nice; that was comforting.

The sun was still shining and the world was still spinning and Reverend Obertask had not removed the curse from my head, but I felt different somehow.

I looked at Burke and said, "I am going to tell you what was in that terrible letter. And the first thing you need to know is that the Flying Elefantes do not exist."

The Flying Elefantes do not exist.

I hated that sentence. I hated it. But I had to say it.

"What do you mean they don't exist?" said Burke.

"I mean there were never any Flying Elefantes. I don't know who my parents were."

And then I went ahead and told him everything, all of it. I told him about young Granny and how her father had looked at her and then turned and walked away from her, and how that was when the curse truly began.

I told Burke about how Granny found me in the alley and picked me up. I told him that she was only someone who had found me and that I was not related to her at all. I told him that whoever Granny was, she was gone now, that she had left me and that I was alone in the world.

"Dang," said Burke when I was done. "Well, I guess the good news is that if she ain't no relation of yours, then the curse ain't your curse."

"What?" I said.

"It ain't your curse. It ain't on your head after all."

"I'm not cursed?" I said.

"I reckon not," said Burke. "Not the way I figure it."

I lay down in the grass. The world was suddenly spinning faster and faster.

Who was I without the Flying Elefantess?

Who was I without Granny?

And who was I without a curse upon my head?

I felt as light as air. I felt as insubstantial as the ghost of a cricket.

"Maybe I don't exist at all," I said to Burke.

"You surely do exist," said Burke. "I know it for a fact." He looked over at me, and then he stood up. He whistled, and Clarence came flying to him and landed on his shoulder.

"Stand up, Louisiana," said Burke.

"No," I said.

"You got to stand up."

"No," I said again.

The winds of fate had deposited me in the alley of the five-and-dime, and then the winds of fate had picked me up and put me in the woods in Georgia, and that was where I was staying. I was never going to move again.

I was worse off even than Pinocchio, a wooden puppet, who at least had a father who loved him and kept searching for him, not to mention a Blue Fairy who showed up from time to time.

I lay on the ground and Burke stood over me and Clarence opened and closed his wings again and again. The sun came beating down through the trees and landed on Burke's arm and lit up Clarence's feathers.

The world was beautiful.

It surprised me, how beautiful it kept on insisting on being. In spite of all the lies, it was

beautiful. In her letter, "Granny" said that I had smiled at her in the alley of the five-and-dime. Was that true?

"Louisiana?" said Burke.

"What?" I said.

"Don't you want to go and find your granny?"

"No," I said. "I don't think so. I don't know what I want. I don't know who I am."

"Okay," said Burke. "All right. We'll figure this out. Didn't you say you had a dog and a cat and friends in Florida?"

Buddy. Archie. Raymie. Beverly.

"Yes," I said.

"Didn't you say Florida was where you belonged?"

"Yes," I said.

"All right, then," said Burke. "You need to go home."

Burke was right. I needed to go home.

I stood up. I said, "What direction is Florida, again?"

Burke rolled his eyes. He said, "I'll help you,

all right? I'll go with you. Me and Clarence both. We need us a map and a bus schedule, and we'll go to Florida."

First we went to the Good Night, Sleep Tight to collect my belongings, but the door to room 102 was locked, and when we went into the motel office, Bernice told Burke to get out.

"You thief," she said. "Leave here immediately."

"I'll wait on you outside, Louisiana," said Burke.

Bernice's hair was still in curlers.

My goodness, I was tired of seeing those curlers. I was tired of seeing Bernice, too.

"What do you want?" she said to me.

"I am here to collect my belongings," I said.

"No," said Bernice. "Your grandmother has absconded, and I do not want to hear whatever hard-luck story you might have about that. I don't want to hear any of it. You will get your

suitcase when the bill is paid, and the bill will only be paid when you have sung at the funeral.”

I stared at Bernice’s head. I concentrated on one curler in particular, and stared at it just as hard as I could. I stared death rays into that curler!

“I’m not afraid of you,” I said.

“Good,” said Bernice. “I’m not afraid of you, either. I’m tired of people taking advantage of my good nature.”

I wondered what good nature she was talking about.

“The funeral is at noon tomorrow,” she said.

Everything I owned was in that suitcase, and I did not have the energy for a battle of the wills.

“Fine,” I said. “I will sing at the funeral.”

“You bet you will,” said Bernice. “Be here at eleven thirty tomorrow morning.”

“Okay,” I said. “And maybe as an extra-special surprise for me, you will actually remove the curlers from your hair.”

I walked out of the office, and Burke was waiting for me.

He had gotten me peanuts from the machine!

"I can't leave yet," I said. "I have to sing at the funeral tomorrow or else I can't get my suitcase back. And I can't leave my suitcase behind, because I have already left too many things behind."

"That works out fine," said Burke. "It'll give us time to plan out the whole thing. You can stay at my house tonight and tomorrow night, and we can leave early on Saturday morning."

I said, "Yes, that is exactly what we will do. We will leave."

I felt a sudden wave of weariness.

My goodness, I was tired of leaving places.

For someone who did not actually have a curse of sundering on her head, it seemed to me that I was involved in quite a bit of sundering.

Twenty-two

When we got back to the pink house in the woods, it smelled sweet again, because Betty Allen was baking another one of her seventeen cakes. This one was pineapple upside-down.

“I have never in my life had a pineapple upside-down cake,” I said to Betty Allen.

“Well, we will have to rectify that, I am sure,” said Betty Allen. “In the meantime, I would like it if Burke Allen explained to me why he wasn’t in school today.”

“I was helping Louisiana,” said Burke.

“You can’t keep skipping school, Burke,” said Betty Allen. “After a time, it will catch up with you, and you will find that life has closed its doors to you. You don’t want life to close its doors to you, do you?”

“No, ma’am,” said Burke. He looked down at his feet.

“Open doors,” said Betty Allen. “That is what we want—doors that are open to us.” She put her hand on Burke’s head and left it there a minute, and then she turned to me. “Sweetie,” she said, “is that the same dress you had on yesterday?”

“It is,” I said. “My other dresses are in my luggage, and my luggage is currently unavailable to me.”

“Why is your luggage currently unavailable to you?”

“Many terrible and complicated things have happened,” I said.

“Well, what are they?”

I stood in the sweet-smelling house and

looked into Betty Allen's gentle face. She looked back at me.

I wanted to tell her that I didn't even know who I was. I wanted to tell her that I had been left. I wanted to tell her that she reminded me of the Blue Fairy.

What I said was, "Have you ever read the story of Pinocchio?"

Burke gave me a shove. He said, "Louisiana's granny ain't feeling good. Can Louisiana stay here with us?"

"What is wrong with your granny?" said Betty Allen.

"She is having tooth problems," I said. "And she needs some time to recuperate. She is extremely unwell. She is also a liar."

Burke gave me another little shove. He said, "Can Louisiana stay or not?"

"Well, for heaven's sake, Burke," said Betty Allen. "Of course Louisiana can stay." She kept her eyes on me. She gave me a very serious look, and then she smiled the most beautiful smile

and reached out her hand and placed it on the top of my head just the same as she had done with Burke. It felt nice.

“Thank you, Mama,” said Burke.

“Thank you, Mrs. Allen,” I said.

“Why don’t you two go and wash up,” said Betty Allen. “Supper is going to be ready soon.”

At the dinner table that night, I sat next to Grandfather Burke.

He said, “Looka here. There she is. Setting right at the table, as pretty as you please. You need you a phone book to set on so as you can reach the table?”

“Don’t pick on her, Grandpap,” said Burke.

“Pick on her? I ain’t picking on her. I’m glad to see her is all.” He winked at me.

“Daddy,” said Burke’s father, “you let her alone now. Let her eat.”

The dinner was fried chicken and green beans and mashed potatoes, and I ate everything

set before me and it was all very good, but truly I wasn't even certain that I was there.

I kept imagining the dark alley of the Louisiana Five-and-Dime.

I kept hearing Burke say, "The curse ain't your curse."

I kept seeing Betty Allen smile at me.

There was vanilla ice cream with chocolate sauce for dessert. We each had our own little cut-glass bowl. There were peanuts sprinkled on top of the chocolate sauce.

I ate all my ice cream. I scraped the bowl with my spoon, and then Grandfather Burke slid his bowl of ice cream over so that it was sitting right in front of me.

I looked down at Grandfather Burke's bowl.

The glass was twinkling in the light. It looked very pretty. It was dark outside, and there were lights on inside and the bowl was catching all the light, and everybody was around the table and the bowl was full of ice cream and chocolate sauce and peanuts, and I felt like I was right

on the verge of understanding something.

And then Grandfather Burke said, "That's for you, doodlebug."

I stared down at the beautiful bowl, and I started to cry.

"Why are you crying?" he said.

I shook my head.

"Leave her alone, Grandpap," said Burke.

"I ain't done nothing to her except to give her my dessert."

I was crying too hard to pick up my spoon, and that is something that has never happened to me before.

"What ails her?" said the grandfather.

"She misses her granny," said Burke.

"I do not miss my granny!" I said.

Grandfather Burke took hold of my hand. In a very gentle voice, he said, "Go on and eat it, darling. Take what is offered to you."

Holding on to his horse hoof gave me some courage and comfort, and after a while, I stopped crying and picked up my spoon.

“There you go, honey,” said Betty Allen.

I ate the whole bowl of ice cream without once letting go of Grandfather Burke’s hand.

“That’s the way to do it,” he said. “That’s just right.”

The peanuts on top of the sundae were particularly good.

The house smelled like pineapple upside-down cake.

Well, the whole world was upside down.

But it was still spinning.

Wasn’t it?

Twenty-three

In the morning, Burke went to school. He said he would find the atlas and tear out the map of Florida and locate Lister and figure out exactly how to get there.

And Betty Allen washed my dress for me, which was very nice and thoughtful of her.

At eleven thirty sharp, I walked into the Good Night, Sleep Tight and turned myself over to Bernice, who did not have her hair in curlers.

You can imagine my surprise. I almost didn't recognize her.

She was wearing a shiny black dress, and her hair wasn't very curly when you considered how much time it had spent in curlers. Mostly, Bernice looked annoyed.

Well, I was annoyed, too. I wanted my suitcase back. I wanted to go home, even though I felt somewhat sad about sundering myself from Betty Allen and Burke Allen, and also from the grandfather Burke Allen, who was very good about sharing his food with me.

We drove to the Lonely Shepherd Church in Bernice's green Buick Skylark. Bernice did not speak to me, and I did not speak to her. Bernice and I were never going to be friends, and that was just fine with me. Actually, I hoped that I never had to see her again in my life.

I hoped that I never had to see Miss Lulu again, either.

"You are going to sing twice," Miss Lulu said to me when we arrived at the church. She held

up two fingers. "At the beginning of the funeral and again at the end. You are going to sing the same song both times."

The song was "Amazing Grace," and it is a song that I have sung a hundred thousand times before because it is what people always want sung at funerals and I have sung at a hundred thousand funerals because it was a good way for that granny person to make some money.

"Here are the words," said Miss Lulu, "if you would like to review them." She handed me a piece of sheet music.

I did not take it from her.

"I know the words," I said.

She sighed, and the sigh smelled like caramel. You would think that eating all that candy would rot her teeth out. I hoped it did.

"I wonder if this child takes her responsibility here seriously," Miss Lulu said to Bernice.

"I assure you she does," said Bernice. She gave me a deadly look.

"Well, let me tell you something," said

Miss Lulu. "I discovered her sneaking around Reverend Obertask's office yesterday with his pipe in her hand. Can you imagine?"

"She's capable of anything," said Bernice. "Her grandmother has disappeared, you know. Vanished. Left the child here on her own. As far as I can tell, she is staying with the Allens, and as you are well aware, that Burke Allen is nothing but a truant and vandal, and he will certainly do nothing to further this child's moral education."

The two of them went on talking like I wasn't even standing there.

Miss Lulu's curls bounced with every word she said.

Bernice's fake curls, however, did not move at all.

The church was filling up with people. And then Reverend Obertask appeared and said to me, "Louisiana Elefante, it is a delight to gaze upon your winsome face once again."

Miss Lulu snorted.

Reverend Obertask put a comforting hand

on my shoulder. He said, "Let's get this show on the road."

"We will begin with the child singing," said Miss Lulu.

"Just as it should be," said Reverend Obertask.
"Just exactly as it should be."

The light came in through the stained-glass windows. Bernice went and sat down, and Miss Lulu started to play the organ, and I stood up there and sang.

Miss Lulu's playing was terrible, of course.

But it was just not possible for me to sing without putting my whole heart into it. "You have a gift, Louisiana, and the more of yourself you put into the song, the more powerful—the more truthful—the song becomes."

That is what "Granny" said to me.

As if that woman knew anything about the truth.

What a liar she was. She was nothing but a

liar. Maybe I wasn't found in an alley at all. Who could say? And speaking of alleys, what kind of people put their baby on top of a pile of cardboard boxes in a dark alley?

It was terrible. Just as Reverend Obertask had said. My parents were terrible. No real mother would ever leave her baby in an alley. Why, Betty Allen would never do such a thing to Burke Allen in a million, trillion years.

Oh, it made me mad to think about it—all of it.

But even though I was mad, I put myself into the song.

I put every bit of myself into it.

There was a rustling out in the pews. It was the sound of people pulling tissues out of their pockets and their purses. They were all crying, and that was good. I wanted them to cry.

I put even more of myself in the song.

And then I saw something truly terrible.

Sitting right there in the very front row was Mrs. Ivy from the dentist's office. Her lips were

in a straight line, and she was pulling a piece of paper out of her purse. Oh, my goodness, it was the bill for teeth removal! She was waving it in the air!

And then I noticed that Dr. Fox was sitting right next to Mrs. Ivy. His little round glasses were winking in the light. He was wearing his dental coat. There was still a spot of blood on it. It seemed like a very inappropriate thing to wear to a funeral.

The room tilted sideways, and then it righted itself again. My goodness, the church building was like a ship on stormy waters.

I kept singing.

And then I saw her—I saw “Granny.” I couldn’t believe it. She was sitting right behind Dr. Fox. She was wearing her fur coat, and she was smiling at me, using all of her teeth. Was she back already from fighting the curse? How did she manage to recover her teeth? Was there no end to her powers?

Way at the back of the church, somebody

went floating by in a flying-trapeze kind of outfit, which is also not the kind of thing you should wear to a funeral. But maybe the spangly outfit was just something I imagined because it was there—a flash of light—and then it was gone.

When I looked away from the glittery light and back at “Granny,” she was still smiling at me. She was sitting up very tall, reminding me to stand up straight, to project my heart into the world.

I shook my head.

The sanctuary was tilting terribly again. Everything was sliding to one side. I stopped singing.

And then Miss Lulu stopped playing the organ, which was a relief.

Everything was silent as silent could be.

And that is when Clarence flew into the Good Shepherd, his dark feathers shining like a light.

Clarence had come looking for me.

It was so quiet in the church that you could hear the flapping of his wings.

It sounded like the beating of a heart.

“Granny” smiled at me. She said, “Provisions have been made, Louisiana.”

At least I think that is what she said.

All I know for certain is that the church tipped again, and this time I tipped with it.

Twenty-four

I woke up in Reverend Obertask's office. I was on the floor, and my head was on a pillow made out of a scratchy tweed jacket.

Reverend Obertask was sitting at his desk, staring down at me.

"Ah," he said. "There you are."

"Here I am," I said.

"You fainted."

The sun was shining in through Reverend Obertask's window and landing right on his head so that he looked like a walrus in a religious

painting. Not that I had ever seen a walrus in a religious painting. Camels, yes. And also horses. And sometimes dogs. And angels, of course. There are always angels in religious paintings. You don't see that many angels in real life, though.

Reverend Obertask smiled at me.

"Mourners faint at funerals," he said. "It's a common occurrence. But you are the first musician I've ever known to faint midsong. Miss Lulu is supremely agitated, of course. She likes for things to go a certain way, a predictable way."

Well, I understood that feeling.

Not that I have ever experienced things going a predictable way.

I closed my eyes. I saw "Granny" smiling with all of her teeth. I saw Mrs. Ivy waving the bill. I saw Dr. Fox in his bloody jacket.

And then I saw Clarence's wings, dark and shiny, beating out the rhythm of a heart.

I opened my eyes and looked at Reverend Obertask. "Was there a crow in church?"

“Not to my knowledge.”

“Oh,” I said. “What about a dentist? Did you see a dentist?”

“I did not,” said Reverend Obertask. “Although I must say that they are a little more difficult to identify at a glance.”

“Did you see anyone wearing a fur coat?”

“No crows, no dentists, no fur coats,” said Reverend Obertask. He smiled at me again.

I said, “I don’t know who I am. I only know that I am not who I thought I was.”

Reverend Obertask nodded his big head. “That is a problem we all face sooner or later, I suppose.”

From out in the church, there came the crashing sound of Miss Lulu on the organ.

Reverend Obertask stood up. “Clearly, Miss Lulu is becoming impatient,” he said. “There is still a funeral to run. Why don’t you rest? I’ll drive you home when this is all over. We can talk things through.”

I closed my eyes.

Reverend Obertask the walrus was going to drive me home.

I wondered where that was—home.

“Provisions have been made.” That is what the Granny mirage had said to me. Or that was what I had heard.

And then, before I knew it, I was asleep. Because I was just so very, very tired.

Reverend Obertask took me to the Allens' house. You could smell the cake baking when we were still out in the woods, before the pink house even came into view.

Reverend Obertask knocked on the back door, and Betty Allen opened it and said, “What in the world?” She opened her arms to me, and I walked right into them. Betty Allen held me tight for a minute, and then she let me go.

“There was a little mishap at the funeral,” said Reverend Obertask. “My, but it smells wonderful in here.”

Betty Allen blushed. "I am the official baker for the carnival," she said.

"Yes, indeed," said Reverend Obertask. "That is why it's called the World-Famous Betty Allen Cake Raffle. What particular cake am I smelling now?"

"That is my pound cake," said Betty Allen. "It is not a fancy cake, but it is very, very good. It is my great-grandmother's recipe."

"It smells divine," said Reverend Obertask.

"I would like to win a pound cake in the World-Famous Betty Allen Cake Raffle," I said.

"Oh, honey," said Betty Allen.

"How would you feel about Mrs. Allen and myself having a private word?" said Reverend Obertask to me.

"Burke should be home from school any minute now," said Betty Allen. "You could wait for him outside."

I went out the back door and stood in the carport and listened to Reverend Obertask say, "I am very worried about this child."

And Betty Allen said back to him, "I am worried, too."

I could tell that the conversation between Reverend Obertask and Betty Allen was going to be extremely sad, and I just didn't think my heart could bear to listen. I walked away from them, down to the end of the driveway. I stood and looked out at the woods.

I whistled for Clarence the same way Burke did—two low whistles and then one high one.

But Clarence didn't come.

I sat down on the ground.

On the drive back from the funeral, I had told Reverend Obertask my story. Or most of my story. I did not tell him that "Granny" was gone, because I did not want Reverend Obertask to contact the authorities. In any case, I started with Elf Ear, Nebraska, and the stage and the sundering that occurred there. I told him about the letter from the fake granny and how it told the story of a magician walking away from his daughter without saying anything to her at all,

and also the story of the Louisiana Five-and-Dime and the dark alley and the flowered blanket and what was inside it—which was me.

I told him about Dr. Fox pulling every last one of “Granny’s” teeth and me lying to Mrs. Ivy about the bill. I told him about the Good Night, Sleep Tight and how it had a vending machine in the vestibule with everything you could ever want inside of it, and also how there was a stuffed alligator in the lobby who was very ferocious-looking. I told him that there had been curtains with palm trees all over them in room 102 and how it was wrong for palm trees to be on curtains in Georgia.

I told him that Bernice was holding my suitcase for ransom and that I would probably never see it again. I told him how I had asked Burke Allen for one bologna sandwich and he had given me two. I told him that Betty Allen was making seventeen cakes—seventeen!—and that the grandfather Burke Allen had given me his bowl of ice cream with chocolate sauce and

peanuts on top of it and that he had held my hand while I ate it.

I told him about Beverly and Raymie. I told him about Buddy the one-eyed dog and how the three of us had rescued him together. I told him about Archie, King of the Cats, and how, once, he had found his way back to me. I told him about the time I almost drowned and that the Blue Fairy had shown up underwater, smiling at me and holding out her arms, and that part of me wanted to go with her, deeper into the pond.

I told him that the operator on the phone in his office had told me that there were no listings for Tapinski and too many listings for Clarke with an e, and no Raymie Clarke at all, and how could that be?

And speaking of how things could be, I asked him again how anybody could leave a baby in an alley.

How could that be?

How could it?

Reverend Obertask stared straight ahead at the road the whole time I was talking.

And here was the surprising thing: he cried.

I talked and he kept his eyes on the road, and I watched one tear and then another tear creep down his sad walrus face and disappear into his whiskers.

When we got to the Good Night, Sleep Tight, I said to Reverend Obertask, "I want to get my suitcase back from Bernice, and I want to go to the Allens' house because Granny is still unwell and needs to sleep a healing sleep."

Reverend Obertask said, "Please wait here, Louisiana."

He went into the motel office, and a few minutes later, he came walking out with my suitcase. The suitcase looked very small in his big hand.

When he got back into the car, Reverend Obertask turned to me and said, "I want you to know something, Louisiana. We all, at some

point, have to decide who we want to be in this world. It is a decision we make for ourselves. You are being forced to make this decision at an early age, but that does not mean that you cannot do it well and wisely. I believe you can. I have great faith in you. You decide. You decide who you are, Louisiana. Do you understand?"

I told him that I did understand.

Even though I wasn't certain that I did.

"And another thing," he said. "You will never understand why your parents left you in that alley. It is impossible to understand. But it may be necessary for you to forgive them, for your own sake, without ever truly understanding what they did. Okay?"

His face was so serious and sad that I said, "Yes, Reverend Obertask. I understand."

But I didn't understand. How could I forgive people who had never shown me any kindness? How could I forgive people who had left me behind without loving me at all?

And so it came to pass that I found myself sitting at the end of a long driveway in front of a pink house that smelled like cake, thinking about forgiveness and who I wanted to be in this world.

Twenty-five

I sat there until Burke Allen came walking out of the woods with Clarence sitting on his shoulder.

“Hey,” said Burke. “Hey, Louisiana. Guess what? I got the whole thing planned out. I know just where to go and what bus to get on and the whole thing.”

And just as he said that, I heard Reverend Obertask say my name.

“Louisiana,” he said.

I turned and looked behind me, and lo and behold, I saw the walrus and the Blue Fairy standing together at the top of the driveway. And even though Pinocchio does not encounter a walrus on his journey, Reverend Obertask and Betty Allen standing there together looked like something out of Pinocchio's story come to life.

Reverend Obertask waved at me, and then he came walking down the driveway and took hold of my hand. He said, "Thank you for talking with me, Louisiana."

I said, "You are welcome."

And then Betty Allen said my name.

"Louisiana Elefante," she called out, "I wonder if you would like to come and help me bake the last cake, which is a marble cake."

"Me?" I said.

"Yes, you, honey."

"Is a marble cake a cake with surprise marbles in it?" I said.

"There's a recipe," said Betty Allen. "The two of us will follow it together."

“Why don’t you go on up there and help her?” said Reverend Obertask. “I’ll get your suitcase out of the car.”

Clarence flapped his wings and took off from Burke’s shoulder and flew away.

Reverend Obertask let go of my hand.

“Go on, Louisiana,” said Burke. “I’ll wait on you.”

The kitchen in the pink house was painted a bright yellow, and being in that room with Betty Allen was like standing inside of the sun.

“Now, what I am going to have you do is measure out the flour and the baking powder and the salt—all the dry ingredients, basically,” said Betty Allen.

I said, “I’ve never made any kind of cake before.”

“Never, ever?” said Betty Allen.

“No,” I said. “My granny does not believe in baking.”

Betty Allen put her hands on her hips. "Well, for heaven's sake. What does she believe in?"

That was a good question.

I considered it.

"Singing," I said finally. "She believes in me singing."

Betty Allen nodded. "Reverend Obertask did say that you have a beautiful voice. Now, here is the flour and salt and what-have-you, and also a few bowls and measuring cups and spoons, and I will just put you to work on this counter over here."

I measured the flour and the salt and the baking powder, and the whole time, Betty Allen was standing at the counter opposite me humming under her breath.

It was warm in the kitchen, and the yellow walls were so bright and Betty Allen's humming was so musical that I started to think that maybe things weren't as tragic as they seemed.

Betty Allen said, "Maybe when we have baked this cake, we will take a big old piece of it

to your granny at the Good Night, Sleep Tight.”

“That is not at all necessary,” I said very, very quickly.

“Your granny doesn’t like cake?” said Betty Allen.

“Her teeth hurt too much to eat,” I said. “It is very difficult to eat cake when you are toothless. The world in general becomes a difficult place without teeth.”

“Oh,” said Betty Allen. “I see.” She went back to humming.

We put everything together into one big bowl—the wet ingredients and the dry ingredients—and mixed it all together with the electric mixer and then poured half of it into a cake pan.

“There,” said Betty Allen. “Now we will add the cocoa to the rest of the batter and swirl it all around. That’s the marbling part. Maybe you want to do that?”

She stood over me. She put her hands on my shoulders and said, “Just pour it on there and swirl.”

I poured. I swirled.

“That’s right,” said Betty Allen. “Make it as swirly as you want.”

When I was done, Betty Allen kept her hands on my shoulders, and we both stared together down at the cake. She said, “Louisiana, you can trust me. You can tell me the truth. Is your granny gone?”

I didn’t answer her. I couldn’t answer her.

I also couldn’t keep myself from crying.

And once I started crying, I couldn’t stop.

I stood there in the yellow kitchen in the pink house, and I cried and cried. I cried because Granny was truly and forever gone, and somehow I knew that she was not coming back. I cried because I was alone. I cried because the curse was not my curse. I cried, and my tears of sadness and despair and hope and anger fell directly into the marble cake that had no marbles.

Betty Allen said, “We would be happy to help you try to find your granny, honey. But you can stay with us for as long as you need to. You can

have a home with us, if that's what you want."

It was such a simple sentence.

Why did it sound so beautiful and impossible?

"Think about it," said Betty Allen. "I know Emma Stonehill over in Family Services. I could talk to her. Reverend Obertask could talk to her, too. We could find a way to make it work, honey."

She picked up the cake pan and turned away from me and opened the oven door. And when the marble cake was inside the oven and the door was closed, Betty Allen clapped her hands together as if she had just performed a magic trick.

"Now," she said, "run on out there and look for Burke. I know he's waiting on you. And, honey, we would all love to have you stay here with us and be a part of our family, but it is your decision entirely."

It was my decision. Entirely.

I went outside, and Burke was there.

He looked at me, and, my goodness, his eyes were bright, and it occurred to me that they were

probably so bright because he had never had to ask himself who he was or where he belonged or who he wanted to be. He was Burke Allen, who was the son of Burke Allen, who was the son of Burke Allen, on and on. Infinitely.

“Do you still want to go to Florida?” said Burke.

“I don’t know,” I told him. “I don’t know what I want to do.”

He nodded.

He whistled for Clarence.

And then Burke said, “Come on and follow me.”

Twenty-six

When I can't think on what I need to do, or when I need to solve a really hard problem, what I do is climb up high, up to the top of that Good Night sign," said Burke.

"Well, I am not climbing up to the top of that sign," I said. "Because as I told you before, I am afraid of heights."

"We don't got to go to the top of the sign," said Burke. "Just to the top of a tree. Setting in a tree and looking up can help you figure things out."

Well, I didn't have any more strength to argue with him.

And in addition, I didn't know who I was. For all I knew, I was somebody who was not afraid of heights. My goodness, it was possible.

I followed Burke to the big live oak beside the Good Night, Sleep Tight. He climbed up into the crook of it, and then he stood there and looked down at me. "All you got to do is give me your hand, Louisiana," he said. "I'll go on ahead of you, and I'll keep holding out my hand to you, all right?"

"Go ahead," I said.

Clarence was sitting on a branch, watching both of us.

"This here is the first step," said Burke. "This is where you start. Come on. You got to do the first part on your own. Grab hold of the tree."

I walked closer to the tree.

Clarence laughed.

"Grab hold of that branch right there," said Burke.

I took hold of the branch. It was rough and warm.

“Good,” said Burke. “Now, go on and pull yourself up just a bit.”

I pulled myself up.

Burke smiled at me. He went up higher in the tree.

“Come on, now,” he said. He held out his hand.

Well, I was off the ground and in the tree, and I just didn’t think I was interested in going much farther. The person I used to call Granny had always told me that I was “overly cautious physically.” And I suppose I was.

But maybe I didn’t have to be.

Maybe it was like Reverend Obertask had said: I could decide who I wanted to be.

Burke said, “Louisiana, if you take my hand and come up higher, I will go and get you anything you want out of that old vending machine.”

And that is always the problem with me, isn’t it?

I cannot keep from wanting things.

"I want peanuts," I said.

"All right," said Burke. He stuck his hand out farther.

"And an Oh Henry! bar."

"Okay," he said.

"Two Oh Henry! bars."

"I'll get you everything you want," he said.

I took Burke's hand. It felt rough and warm, the same as the tree branch.

"Come on," said Burke. "I got hold of you. Put your foot right there. Don't look down."

I put my foot where he told me to. I kept hold of his hand. I did not look down. And bit by bit, we climbed to the top of the tree.

It is a wondrous thing to be at the top of a tree!

Particularly when you have two Oh Henry! bars to eat. And a bag of peanuts.

When we got to the top, Burke left me

and climbed back down to go to the vending machine.

I stayed and held on to the branch. I looked down and guess what?

I did not feel afraid. I truly did not. Maybe it was because Clarence was on the branch next to me, or maybe it was just because I was done with being afraid. Or who knows? Maybe I had never been afraid of heights to begin with. Maybe it was just one more lie that “Granny” had told me about myself.

I don’t know.

But I do know that I ate both candy bars and all the peanuts. Burke and Clarence were beside me, and even though the light was fading, I was happy.

The three of us watched together as the sky turned into a purple kind of blue.

“Lookit,” said Burke. “You can see the stars now.”

It got darker and the stars got brighter, and I

still felt happy, so I started to sing. I sang a song about sitting in a tree with a boy and a crow, looking up at the stars.

It was a happy song. I put an Oh Henry! bar into it. And also peanuts and a marble cake. I did not add curses or dark alleys. I put only happy things in the song, and it made me happy to sing it.

“Dang,” said Burke when I was done. “That’s a good song.”

At least I knew that about myself. At least I knew I was somebody who could sing.

That was something Granny had given me.

She had given me a lot. I suppose.

“Look right there,” I said to Burke. “That’s the Pinocchio constellation.”

“Where?” said Burke.

“That one right there. See? That is the face, and that is the long nose of someone telling a lie.”

“Shoot, Louisiana,” said Burke. “That constellation is called the Big Dipper. Grandpap showed

me that one forever ago. See how it looks like a big old scoop? And that's the handle to it, right there. It ain't a nose. It's a handle. And over there is the North Star. That's the one you want to look for when you're lost in the woods, because then you know what direction north is, and then you ain't lost anymore."

"Oh," I said.

I stared up at the North Star. I could not imagine not being lost.

"We should probably head on back so they don't come looking for us," said Burke. "You want me to help you? With the climbing down?"

"No," I said. "I can do it. You go ahead of me, and I'll follow you."

"All right," said Burke.

"Have you ever had marble cake?" I asked Burke as we went down the tree.

"I have had all of them cakes that Mama makes," he said. "I have had every one of them. They're all good."

"Your mother figured out that Granny is

gone,” I said when we were both back on the ground.

Burke turned to me.

“And she told me that I could stay with you,” I said. “That I could live with your family.”

“That means you ain’t going to go back to Florida, then?”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do,” I said. “Do you want me to stay?”

Burke shrugged. He said, “I think it would be all right if you stayed. I think it would be great if you stayed.” He shrugged again. “But I ain’t going to tell you what to do.”

I nodded. I said, “Show me again which star is the North Star.”

Burke pointed. “That one. Right there.”

“Thank you,” I said.

It seems like a good thing to know the star that can keep you from being lost in this world.

Twenty-seven

We all went to the carnival—me and Burke and Betty Allen and the father Burke and the grandfather Burke. And I still had not made up my mind whether I would stay or whether I would leave. I just could not decide.

But the good news is that the World-Famous Betty Allen Cake Raffle was set up on the lawn in front of the Lost Shepherd Church. The cakes were arranged end to end on a long table, and they were beautiful to behold.

There was a large glass fishbowl on the table, too, and every time somebody bought a raffle ticket, Betty Allen ripped the ticket in half and put one half into the bowl and handed the other half back to the person who hoped to win a cake.

The piano had been rolled out from the social hall, and Miss Lulu was playing what she must have thought was an appropriate cake raffling song. It occurred to me that no matter what I did, I just could not escape from Miss Lulu and her attempts at making music.

It cost a dollar for every ticket, and Burke Allen the grandfather gave me five dollars so I could purchase five tickets because I really, really wanted to win a cake.

“I would buy you all them cakes, doodle-bug,” said Grandfather Burke. “I would buy you every last one of them. You don’t even got to throw your tiny hat into the ring. All you got to do is say the word and I will buy ’em all up for you.”

But I wanted to enter the raffle.

I wanted to throw my tiny hat into the ring.

I wanted to take my chances.

Miss Lulu continued to play music—pounding away at what sounded to me like a cake raffle dirge—until all the tickets were sold and then Betty Allen said, “We have seventeen cakes, ladies and gentlemen. And I will call seventeen winning numbers.”

People applauded, and I clapped, too. And then I looked down at my tickets. Were they winning tickets? I could not tell. I studied them very carefully.

Betty Allen cleared her throat. Miss Lulu played a dramatic piano roll.

Betty Allen said, “The first winner is two fifty-six.”

Well, I did not have ticket number 256. I went through my five tickets several times just to make sure. A very large lady in a purple dress shouted, “That’s me! That’s me! I have won a

cake!" And she moved up to the table to select her cake while Miss Lulu played another dramatic roll on the piano, and everybody applauded.

And then we started all over again. Betty Allen put her hand into the fishbowl. Miss Lulu played some piano, and then Betty Allen pulled out a ticket and called out a number, and it was not my number.

Pretty soon, we had made it through almost all the cakes. There was just one left and it was the pineapple upside-down cake, and even though I would have been very happy to win it, I have to say that the pineapple rings on the top of it seemed the tiniest bit desperate. There is something very sad about pineapple rings.

I looked up at Grandfather Burke. He was studying me with a serious look on his face. And then I looked over at Betty Allen. She was holding the bowl with the numbers in it, and she was watching me, too.

I smiled at Betty Allen, and she smiled back at me. The light was shining off the fishbowl in

a very beautiful way. Betty Allen put the bowl back on the table and reached her hand in and pulled out the last ticket. She did not once take her eyes off me.

I thought, *I have won! I have won the last cake!*

The fishbowl was all lit up with numbers and light. It really was a beautiful fishbowl.

And then I remembered the little glass bowls that Betty Allen had used for the ice-cream sundaes. I remembered sitting at the glass-topped table with all of the Allens. I remembered Grandfather Burke sliding his bowl over to me and saying, "That's for you, doodlebug. Take what is offered to you."

And I knew what I wanted to do.

I knew who I wanted to be.

I wanted to be the person who sat at that table.

I wanted to stay.

Betty Allen cleared her throat. She called out the last winning number.

And guess what?

It was not my number. I did not win a cake.
But I did not care.
I was staying.

Twenty-eight

And so here I am, Granny, almost at the end of the story.

Imagine how surprised I am to find that you are the one I am writing it for.

And speaking of surprise, you will not be surprised to learn that Reverend Obertask is better at dealing with telephone operators than I am.

I stood beside him in his office at the Good Shepherd Church while he talked to all the

wrong Clarkes and then to the right Clarke—Raymie's mother.

And then, finally, Reverend Obertask said, "Hello, Raymie Clarke. There is someone here who needs to speak to you," and he handed the phone to me.

And the very first thing Raymie said to me was that Archie was there with her!

She said he showed up at the back door and yowled until they let him in, and he has stayed there. He hasn't left the house at all. And Raymie believed that I would show up again, too.

"When are you coming back?" said Raymie.

I had to tell her that you were gone, Granny. And that you were not my granny to begin with, and that you had picked me up in an alley, and that my parents were not the Flying Elefantes and that my real parents were unknown to me, and that I was not, after all, afraid of heights. I told her everything.

And then I had to tell her I was staying in Georgia.

“What do you mean, staying?” said Raymie.

“I mean I am going to live here with the Allen family.”

“But what about us?” said Raymie.

I started to cry then.

The sun was shining into Reverend Obertask’s office. It was lighting up his walrus whiskers and the perpetually joyous dust motes.

And a long way away in Florida, Raymie was crying, too. I could hear her.

Reverend Obertask cleared his throat. He said, “You know, people in Florida visit people in Georgia quite frequently.”

I took a deep breath. I said to Raymie, “You could come see me. All of you could come see me. I am only one state away.”

They came to visit a week later.

Mrs. Clarke drove Raymie and Beverly and Buddy and Archie over the Florida-Georgia state line. She said that it was like being in charge of a traveling circus to have all of them in one car, but they came.

And Burke Allen and Betty Allen and I have gone to visit Beverly and Raymie and Buddy in Florida.

Archie, King of the Cats, goes back and forth. Sometimes he stays with me, and sometimes he stays with Raymie, because he is a cat and he does what he wants to do.

Clarence the crow is starting to trust me. He comes when I whistle. He has not yet landed upon my shoulder. But he will, Granny. He will.

I have respected your wishes. I have not come searching for you. But I have crossed the Florida-Georgia state line many, many times since we last spoke, and I look for you every time I cross over. I know that you will not be there, but I look anyway.

And I dream about you.

In my dream, you are standing in front of the vending machine from the Good Night, Sleep Tight, and you are smiling at me, using all of your teeth. You say, "Select anything you want,

darling. Provisions have been made. Provisions have been made.”

I am so happy when you show up in my dreams and say those words to me.

Thank you for picking me up in the alley of the Louisiana Five-and-Dime.

Thank you for teaching me to sing.

I don't know if you made it to Elf Ear or not. But I want you to know that there is no curse of sundering upon my head.

I love you, Granny.

I forgive you.