



## *twenty-five*

Jolene shot the hose stream straight up in a spray that spattered the queen palms' fronds. The palms fluttered delightedly in the reverse rain and dripped over Ware and Jolene lying underneath.

While they cooled off, Ware made some calculations. "We built five feet of wall this morning, and it's in the back, where it needs to be tallest. The perimeter is around four hundred feet, but the front and the sides will go faster, since the wall can be shorter there. If you really can get a shopping cart from the Greek Market lady, we can get it done in four weeks."

"What about . . ." Jolene's hand drifted toward the community center.

"So . . ." Ware considered. He hadn't meant to quit

entirely, but he couldn't see himself going back, so there it was. "It's great there, of course. Lots of funnation. But I don't have to go."

Jolene puffed out her bangs and raised a pale eyebrow.

"My grandmother's in the hospital, and my parents don't want to have to worry about me, too. Being alone and having nothing to do. I'm not alone here, and there's plenty to do, so it's okay with them."

"What's she in the hospital for?"

"She fell. She broke her hips."

"Why'd she fall?"

"*Why?* No *why*. She just fell."

"People don't just *fall*." Jolene took off her hat and waved it around. "One minute you're standing, then boom, you're *down*, broken *bones*. Something happened. What happened?"

"Well . . . I don't know, I wasn't there." Ware turned his head. He felt a wave of revulsion sweep through him, as if he'd lifted a rock and found maggots. He'd been in a pool, floating around, waiting for some silly lights to come on. *Had* something happened to Big Deal? Something from her condition, being old? Something he should have protected her from?

He rolled away and tugged up some grass. "She broke both her hips and had to have them replaced. That's all."

Jolene propped herself up on her elbows and flung off her shades. Her eyes gleamed in a way that made Ware feel queasier. "What did they do with them?"

"With what?" he asked. Although he knew.

"Her old hips. The bones, right? I never thought about people parts."

"They got rid of them, I guess. It doesn't matter. We should get back to work."

"It doesn't matter?" Jolene's eyes bugged out at the depth of Ware's ignorance. "In lots of places, they just leave stuff out for buzzards or rats. How about that for your grandmother's old bones? Or how about landfills? People break in, looking for stuff they can sell. How about if someone found her hips, put them up for sale?"

"That couldn't happen. That would be terrible."

"Oh, right. I forgot, you live in Magic Fairness Land." She lay back and covered her face with her hat. "But here in the real world, bad things happen."

Ware jumped up. "Break's over. Back to work."



## *twenty-six*

Ware gave Jolene the silent treatment, which she didn't seem to notice, for the rest of the morning. But when she pitched her tools into the hedge to leave, he found he didn't want to be alone. "So . . . you want to go home and make lunch? I'll wait."

"Not going home." She pulled out the garbage bag, then headed for the rear driveway. As she passed her compost piles, she waved toward them. "Need more stuff."

"Okay, wait. I'll go with you."

"Nope." And she was gone.

Ware retrieved his lunch, although he wasn't hungry, and climbed the tower. He forced down the peanut butter sandwiches, stiff and dry, and drank the juice, hot as soup.

In the heat, the banana had browned. He flung it hard



over the edge of the tower wall. As he watched it fall, he remembered: *People don't just fall*, Jolene said. Something had happened to Big Deal.

Ware had handwritten the Knights' Code in his report, on the last page, page eleven. It had taken so long to get it looking just right that he'd memorized all thirteen rules. Number three was: *Thou shalt respect all weaknesses and constitute thyself the defender of them.*

He hadn't constituted himself the defender of his own grandmother's weakness. "Big Deal, I notice you aren't feeling well today," he could have said. "Plus there's your condition of being pretty old. Let's call the doctor."

It would have been so easy.

Across the parking lot, the queen palms drooped as though they were ashamed for him.

Below, though, the growing wall gave him hope. The do-over moat would be full soon. He could be reborn. This time, besides being normal, he'd be the kind of kid who would notice when his grandmother wasn't feeling well. The kind of kid who would do something about it.



## *twenty-seven*

One week later, the days had fallen into a routine.

In the mornings, when the three queen palms shaded Jolene's garden, Ware helped her. Jolene kept up a running lecture on the history of trash management, and Ware always cut her off when she suggested some horrific possibility for the disposal of Big Deal's old hip bones. Otherwise he liked being there.

The first papayas were studded with tiny fruits; the second crop was shooting leaves out left and right in their joy at escaping their cans and landing in the nice, rich compost. Another thirty ChipNutz cans had joined the forty-seven emptied ones, and Jolene had hammered nail holes into their bottoms and planted a seed in each. The seventy-seven brand-new papayas were already poking

up little green nubs, as if they wanted to know what all the celebrating was about.

Once the shade left, it was wall time.

When Ware first offered Jolene his sunscreen, she looked at him as if it were a tube of warm spit, but after that she seemed to enjoy the wafting coconut scent as much as he did.

Together, they lassoed big hunks of masonry and dragged them over the edge. They kept the hose beside them and took long guzzles of the hot-rubber-tasting water when the heat blasting off the foundation parched their throats to sandpaper.

Jolene never gave up control of Mrs. Stavros's sledgehammer, and Ware always pretended this was a painful injustice. In truth, he was relieved. What if he couldn't swing it?

Once Jolene had busted a hunk of wall into smaller blocks, his job was to wheel them away in the shopping cart, then stack them. He liked this best, fitting the blocks together, filling the gaps with plastic bags full of gravel and then sealing those in with the caulking he'd found in his shed.

Like Jolene's plants, the wall grew a little every day.

Quitting time was always around one o'clock, when Jolene headed off to the Greek Market with her garbage bag.

Ware always tried to go with her, and she always refused to allow it. The more she refused, the more he wanted to go.

"Why not?" he complained after a couple of days.

"Because I say."

"You can't make up the rules. It isn't fair."

Jolene rolled her eyes—"There you go again, Magic Fairness Land!"—and walked around him.

He gave up after that. For the rest of each afternoon, he felt alone, but it was the peaceful kind of alone, not the lonely kind. He ate his lunch in the tower, then overlapped the new stretch of wall with garbage bags filled with gravel. He worked on his stained-glass window, or cleared and mopped an area of floor. He finished the sundial and started building a throne.

Another week passed, same, same, same.

Then came Friday.



*twenty-eight*

Friday, Ware was in the tower when he heard a car pull up in front of the church.

The car was large and sleek, a serious-looking charcoal color. A man wearing a serious-looking charcoal-colored suit got out. Even from up in the tower, Ware could see that his shoes were extremely shiny.

This, he thought, was a good sign. Nobody with shoes that shiny would come into a lot this dirty.

The man didn't. He strode in a very purpose-driven way to the center of the construction fencing, set a briefcase on the sidewalk, and opened it.

He drew out a bright yellow sign and attached it to the chain-link fence. Then he snapped his briefcase shut, strode back to his car, and took off.

Ware ran down the stairs, over to Jolene. He pointed out to the street and she seemed to understand.

The bright yellow notice was attached to the fence top and bottom, as if it wasn't going anywhere.

## **PUBLIC AUCTION**

**Parcel #788**

**Zoned Commercial .75 Acre**

### **COMING THIS FALL**

Ware glanced at Jolene beside him. Her face wore a look of terror. He clutched his chest at the full hundred-arrow volley. "It's okay, Jolene. It's going to be okay."

Jolene shook her head at the empty words, kept on shaking it. After a moment, she turned and ran down the street to the backyard of the Greek Market. He watched her shove through the bushes and disappear.

Standing alone on the wrong side of the fence, Ware felt exposed. He climbed back over and headed up the front walkway in shock.

Everything looked different now. The wrecked church, the growing garden, the whole lot, all looked fragile. They looked as if they were begging for help.

His eye caught a flash of metal from under a holly bush near the drawbridge.

Ware crouched and found a surprise: an A-frame sandwich board. He dragged it free.

Spelled out in black plastic letters, on both sides of the sign, was a message: **BE NOT AFRAID.**

And it was back in his head: the fear on Jolene's face when she'd read the auction notice, complete with another *thunk* to his heart.

Ware carried the sign around to her garden and planted it beside her papayas.

**BE NOT AFRAID**, Jolene.



## *twenty-nine*

“**W**hat’s this supposed to mean?” Jolene’s hands were balled on her hips.

Ware took a step back. “What it says. Don’t be afraid.”

Jolene’s knuckles whitened. “Who says I’m afraid?”

“Come on. I saw your face when you read that sign.”

She looked over to where the notice gleamed. Her whole skeleton seemed to collapse. “They’ll never get ripe. I’ll never sell them and get the money I need. I was so stupid.” She kicked over a papaya seedling.

Ware hurried to tip up the can. He patted the soil around the little plant as best he could. “It isn’t right. We made this such a good place.”

Jolene shook her head in disgust. “Maybe in Magic Fairness Land the right thing happens. But not here.”



She kicked over another can. "I'm not going to leave them here to get killed by a bulldozer. I'll do it myself."

"Stop it."

Jolene didn't. She kicked another one, and another. "And then I'll have to get some jobs."

"No, Jolene. We won't let it happen. You won't lose this garden."

"What are you talking about?"

What *was* he talking about?

Ware suddenly saw page eleven in his report. Number twelve seemed to be lit up. *Thou shalt be always the champion of the Right and the Good, against Injustice.*

*That's* what he was talking about.

This was Injustice, all right. He needed to be a champion of the Right and the Good.

This was, in fact, the purpose that would drive his life, he was suddenly certain.

He pulled himself up tall. "I won't let it happen, Jolene. I will save your garden."

Jolene snorted. "How are you going to do that?"

"I don't know yet. But I will. You won't lose your garden. I pledge."

"You *pledge*?"

“Promise. I promise.”

“For real?”

“For real.”

Jolene eyed him hard for a long time. Then she carefully righted the cans. Her hands, as she patted the plants back into place, looked like she was praying.

When she walked out of the lot, Ware was left alone with his vow.

It was an insane, impossible-to-keep promise, of course.

But he didn't care. Because when he'd made it, his heart—which, he suddenly understood, had been useless up until now, just killing time pumping his blood around—his heart had lifted right out of his chest, as if it had been reborn as a bird, and was now soaring somewhere near the top of the watchtower.

And the view from there was terrific.



Friday was different at home, too.

“You moved her into the rehab place?” Ware asked his mother when he found her in the kitchen. “Is she okay?”

“More than okay,” she answered. “The doctors say she’s healing well. And she’s like her old self already. We hadn’t been in the room an hour before she was telling the staff how to schedule her roommate’s kidney dialysis. Who else but Big Deal, huh?”

The knot of worry Ware had been carrying loosened a little. “Actually, I can think of one other person. . . .”

“Fair enough, I guess I did inherit that gene,” she admitted with a laugh. “Now, let me make you something to eat. I’ve missed you.” She opened the fridge and

frowned. "Not a fruit or vegetable in sight."

And with those words, Ware saw a complete side-flank strategy open up in the Greek Market battle, simple and Jolene-proof. "I'll get some," he offered casually. "There's a place near the Rec."

His mother dug a couple of twenties from her wallet. "No junk."

Ware scrubbed his hands, then sat and watched as she shook some crackers onto a plate and sliced some cheddar. "Where is this rehab place?" he asked when she joined him at the table. "Can I go see her?"

"May,' not 'can.' It's downtown. You could take the bus after Rec, I suppose. I can't take you. I have zero free time. I'll stop in on my way home from work sometimes, but . . ." She dropped her head to her hands. "There's so much to figure out. Insurance. What to do about her furniture if she needs to move. The whole mess."

Ware put down his cracker. If something had happened to Big Deal, something about her condition, something he hadn't defended her from, that caused her to fall, then *the whole mess* was his fault.

"Well, it's nothing for you to worry about. Your uncle Cy and I will figure it out."

He swallowed hard. "No, Mom. You have to tell me about stuff like that."

They both startled at a soft thud of distant thunder. Ware glanced out the window. The sky looked bumpy and yellow, like the cantaloupes Jolene had tossed on her compost pile yesterday. Thunderstorm coming, right on schedule.

"I'm not kidding, Mom. You and Dad have to tell me things. I'm not some little kid anymore."

"Hey, watch it. You're not *some* little kid. You're *my* little kid. The only one I've got."

Ware didn't answer. His mother said that a lot. Always before, it made him feel treasured. But today it felt as if she'd wrapped a blanket over his face.

She reached over and ran a thumb around his forehead at the hairline. "You're filthy. What have you been doing?"

"So . . . we're gardening."

"We? Who's we?" she asked, brightening in such a hopeful way that Ware's heart fell.

"Mom, don't worry about me."

"Well, I do. Because . . ." She picked her napkin from her lap and folded it into a neat triangle. "When I was young, I was—"

"I know. Class president, a million friends. And Dad played three sports. I know."

"I just want you to be happy."

He thought about telling her that sometimes he was happy spending time alone. But no matter how many times he tried, she would never understand. He'd learned this the evening before his eighth birthday, when she had come barging into his room.

"Didn't you hear me calling you?" she'd asked, eyes panicked.

Ware scrambled to his feet, confused. He'd done something wrong, but what? "Sorry, I was . . ."

His mother charged around the room, snapping on his two lamps, the overhead light. Erasing the dramatic shadows that the low winter rays were casting on his ceiling. "Lying on the floor all alone in the dark? Why didn't you hear me? Do you know how worried I was? What were you doing?"

Her questions were coming too fast, or maybe his brain had slowed. "I was . . . thinking about eights."

"What?"

"Looking," he'd corrected himself. "Looking at how eights are really circles on circles." He hoped he'd gotten

the right answer, the one that would ease the anxiety on his mother's face.

He hadn't.

"Looking isn't doing, Ware. What were you *doing*?"

"I was doing *in my mind*." He pointed to the ceiling, tried to show her how the swirls of plaster made an infinity of vertical infinity signs. "See?"

"Oh, Ware," she said, sinking onto the bed with her head in her hands. "I just want you to be happy."

Which had only confused him more. Lying on the floor, he'd actually been aware of the physical presence of happiness. It felt as if he'd swallowed a glowing seed. But his mother's face was so very sad.

"I'll try, Mom," he'd promised, meaning it. "I'll try more."

Three and a half years later, apparently he still hadn't tried enough.

"Do you think people can ever get a redo?" he asked. "If something's wrong with them, can they start over, like brand-new?"

"Oh. No, I'm afraid not. Your grandmother's prognosis is very good, but she won't be like new."

Ware suddenly felt alone. Not the peaceful kind of

alone, the lonely kind. He got up and brought his plate to the sink.

His mother rose, too. She went to the calendar. "Six more weeks until we own this house," she said.

They both jumped at a crack of thunder, close by. Ware went to the window. Black clouds were tumbling in.

His mother joined him. "It's going to be fine," she said, head pressed to the glass spattered with sudden rain.

Ware couldn't tell if she was talking to herself or to him. "It's going to be fine," she said again, as if whoever it was needed extra reassurance.

Ware thought about the new notice, his impossible vow, his grandmother falling on his watch.

"It's going to be okay."

He wasn't so sure.





## *thirty-one*

The next day, Ware lay on his side watching Jolene swing the sledgehammer in a storm of concrete dust. He had stuck close to her all morning, afraid she was going to abandon the lot again. But she had worked hard hoeing a new trench, and Ware understood that the hoeing was a message: she'd decided to trust him. This felt like a miracle, and the miracle made him feel both relieved and anxious at the same time.

"Don't you think this lot should feel different?" he asked. He'd been wondering again about what made water holy, which was a thing he kept secret from Jolene, of course—they might not be enemies, but his plan to get reborn still felt too feathery and brave to risk sharing—when the question had expanded. "I

mean, it was a church. Don't you think it should still feel different here?"

"I told you." Jolene slammed the hammer down. "They took all the holy with them."

"But what does holy even feel like? Do you think we'd notice if it came back?"

Above, the queen palms rustled a warning. Ware sat up. He heard the tight hiss of a bike braking and the clang of it tossed against the construction fencing.

He and Jolene watched Ashley drop down over the fencing and shake herself into composure. Her cool evaporated when she saw the operation in the parking lot. She hurried over.

"You can leave," Jolene said, leaning in threateningly. Her safety glasses made her look like a giant bug surveying a meal. "We're covering the pavement. With water. No more danger for those birds. So, bye."

Ashley looked skeptical.

Jolene dropped the hammer and yanked off the goggles.

Ware stepped between them. "It's true. We're building a wall around the foundation. We're making a moat."

"A *moat*? Like around a castle? That's, um, ridiculous?"

Ware turned away, face burning. Moats weren't ridiculous. Most people thought they only protected castles from ground-level approaches, but tunneling ambushes were much more dangerous, and a moat made those impossible.

"You want to be a knight in shining armor, big hero, chivalry and all that stuff?" Ashley went on.

Ware had to step away at that. *Knights were brave, they were loyal, they administered justice*, he recited to himself, stomping up the back steps. On top of that, they practically invented leading purpose-driven lives. From age seven their purpose was to train for knighthood. After they were knighted, it was to serve their liege lords.

The problem, he had to admit when he had climbed to the top of the tower, was the chivalry part.

Ware remembered the evening he'd handed his mother his report. "What a crock!" she'd sputtered.

Ware, sitting on the floor beside her chair as she read, had been crestfallen. "Mrs. Sprague didn't think it was a crock. I got an A."

"Oh, not your report. Your report is very good. But here?" She pointed to page eleven. "This business of protecting fair damsels? If the men hadn't deprived the

women of their rights in the first place, they wouldn't need to go showing off about how chivalrous they were! What a crock."

Her words had left him dismayed for days. If the Knights' Code no longer applied in today's world, that meant that he himself would never have a chance to exemplify its standards. To live a life of honor, of service to a liege lord. Most importantly, to come to the rescue of those in need.

Ware had stockpiled numerous imaginary scenarios for coming to the rescue of those in need. Due to his temporary lack of muscles, he populated them with people from the extreme ends of the age range: babies crawling into oncoming tidal waves; old people too weak to finish crossing the street. In each, he'd swoop in—chin up, chest out, advancing boldly—to pluck them from disaster's brink.

When he'd thought about it more rationally, he'd realized that it was only that one part about damsels that didn't apply. Nowadays, girls didn't need special treatment as if they were weaker—in fact, nowadays they'd be knights, too. All the rest of the code was still okay.

No, the real disappointment was that *he* never would

be a knight. He hadn't even protected his own grandmother when she'd needed it. He'd promised to save a papaya garden from a bank but didn't have a clue how.

Now, everywhere he looked he saw the ridiculousness of his dreams reflected back at him. Even the queen palms seemed to be working hard to hold down a laugh.

Him, hero material?

What a crock.

Jolene's voice floated up. "You don't tell one single person about this place. Not one single word."

And then it struck him. He flew down the stairs, ran back to the girls.

"That's the whole deal?" Ashley was asking. "All I have to do is not tell anyone, and you'll actually cover all this pavement with water?"

"Yep," said Jolene.

"Nope," said Ware.

Both girls spun to him.

"You're going to do one more thing."

"Oh? What's that?" Ashley said.

"Get your father to order the bank not to auction this place."

"Please. I don't think so."

Ware grabbed his thigh and grimaced. "All those broken crane legs . . ."

Ashley crossed her arms. "Fine. You actually make a moat here and I'll talk to my father." She walked off, ponytail swinging.

Jolene's eyebrows took a hike up above her sunglasses.

And in their mirrors, Ware saw himself again. A kid who was not quite so pathetic after all.



*thirty-two*

Ware had never seen the Greek Market before, because it faced Second Street and his mother had determined that First Street was the most efficient route downtown, and once she'd determined the most efficient route anywhere, she never wavered.

When Ware grew up, he'd take a different route every time he went somewhere.

Anyway, there it was right next door behind the east wooden fence. A sign over the awning announced *Greek Market* in gold letters, in case he'd missed it, but he wouldn't have. For a moment, he could only stand outside on the sidewalk and stare.

As Ware headed into kindergarten, his parents had staggered him with a superdeluxe box of 128 crayons.

All those colors displaying themselves in a rainbow of promise, all for him.

He felt the same joy of abundance now. Fruits and vegetables burst out of their bins, so bright they seemed to be lit from within. *You see that? Wow!* he would have said. Except as always, who could he show?

Ware had left only ten minutes after Jolene, but she was nowhere in sight. Probably she was grabbing stuff from the dumpster. The question was, what did she do after that? She was never back by the time Ware left, so where did she spend the afternoons, dragging a bag of garbage?

Ware shook his head—he had an actual job to do here in the forbidden Greek Market—and stepped inside.

He picked up a basket and tossed in a package of blueberries and a head of lettuce, then carrots, tomatoes, bananas, and plums, then headed for the register.

“Hot one out there,” he said to the checkout lady. Ware appreciated that for six months of the year, that was the greeting everyone gave whenever they went anywhere in Florida. It made things easier not to have to come up with an original opening line.

“Hot one out there, yes indeed,” the lady agreed.



Ware placed his basket on the counter. Beside him, a crate of what looked like lumpy footballs, mottled green and orange, caught his attention.

He reached out to touch one, felt the leathery skin.

The sign on the bin had fallen over. Curious, he flipped it up: PAPAYAS, \$1.99 a pound.

Papayas. Ware lifted one, felt its surprising weight.

"I know some papaya plants," he told the checkout lady, although he hadn't planned to add anything after the "hot one out there" opening. "They're pretty spindly."

"That so?" the checkout lady said.

Ware looked down doubtfully at the heavy fruit in his hand. "I don't know how they'll hold fifty of these."

"Things generally grow into what's needed of them," she said. "That is what they do."

"Do you really think so?"

"That has been my experience, yes, indeed." She took the papaya from him. As she leaned to the scale to weigh it, Ware glimpsed an open door behind her.

Outside was a garden. A woman with white-streaked hair piled on her head stood beside a table under an arbor of vines. She wore a flowered blouse and baggy trousers belted with twine. A girl with stringy yellow hair falling

over faded overalls perched at the table.

Ware watched Jolene drink from a glass of purple juice and dig into a plate heaped with food.

The checkout lady straightened, blocking his view. Ware leaned to see around her.

“That’ll be twenty-three twenty,” the checkout lady said, thumping his purchases into a paper bag.

Ware craned his neck. The woman in the garden—Mrs. Stavros, it had to be—was pointing to the grapes above her head, and Jolene was nodding.

“Twenty-three twenty,” the cashier repeated, one hand out, the other on her hip, teapot-style.

Ware rose on his toes, the closest he had to a watchtower. Mrs. Stavros dished more food onto Jolene’s plate with a hand on her shoulder, and Jolene threw her head back and out came a sound Ware had never heard before.

It was a nice sound—gurgly and soft, like water bubbling out of a fountain. A real surprise coming from someone with such sharp elbows and knees. Someone with arrow-slit eyes.

If he’d been in an actual watchtower he might have toppled out. He hadn’t known Jolene could laugh.



*thirty-three*

When Ware lowered himself from the oak limb that afternoon and saw the man at the bus stop, he nearly dropped the groceries.

It was the man's hair. Dark brown like his mother's, rippled and close-cut like his own.

He took a quick step behind the tree, but the man turned.

"Ware," he called, lifting his hand. "There you are."

Ware walked over on legs that suddenly didn't feel quite solid. "Uncle Cy. What are you doing here?"

Uncle Cy wagged a finger. "Wrong question, little man," he said with the kind of laugh that meant things weren't funny. At all. "The right question is, what are

you doing *not* in there?" He nodded to the community center.

Ware opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

"I'll start." Uncle Cy patted the bench and Ware sank down. "Your mom asked me to pick you up. Imagine my surprise when I went inside and couldn't find my nephew."

Ware could imagine, all right. He dropped his head to his hands. "Did you ask?"

"I did. Some teenager. He pointed me to the sign-in sheet. No nephew today. No nephew all week."

Ware groaned. He peeked between his fingers. "You reported me? Missing, or something?"

"No. I almost called your mother, but then I remembered she said you took the three forty-five bus home each day. I thought: Hmm. She drops you off, you don't go in but you take the bus home. So I decided to wait here."

Ware raised his head. "I can't stand it, Uncle Cy. It's awful."

"Well, I saw that. When I was your age, I would have ditched that place, too. But hiding behind a tree all day long? That's not good, little man."

“I don’t do that.”

“I saw you, Ware. You came out from behind that big oak.” Uncle Cy’s voice was gentle but sad.

Ware stood up, hoisted the bag. “Come with me,” he said. “I’ll show you where I go.”



## *thirty-four*

Uncle Cy pulled a beer from the fridge and hopped onto the counter. He moved like a cat, lanky and cool.

Ware put the groceries away and poured himself some orange juice. “Are you going to tell them?” He stole a sideways glance at his uncle.

Uncle Cy rested his head on the cupboard. “What do you think?”

“No. Maybe. But please don’t.” Ware lifted himself onto the counter beside his uncle. He cupped his glass with both hands, hiding the silly seahorses that pranced around the rim. “My mom thinks I need more”—he lifted air-quote fingers from the cup—“Meaningful Social Interaction.”

Uncle Cy sighed. "It's what she does, my little sister. Fixes things. Even things that don't need fixing. You don't seem like you need fixing to me."

The unexpected kindness of the words undid Ware. *He didn't seem like he needed fixing.* He felt himself on the verge of tears. "Unless she's right. Maybe there's something wrong with me."

Uncle Cy put down his beer. He took off his glasses and polished them on the belly of his shirt, then put them back on and looked at Ware expectantly.

And Ware surprised himself. He told his uncle all of it. How he felt different from other kids, kids who tumbled through life in packs, who jumped into the middle of whatever was going on. How he liked to watch from the edges for a while, do reconnaissance from the watchtower. And how he could spend hours by himself, making things or just thinking, and not be bored.

And then he told his uncle the worst. "She wishes she had a normal kid."

Uncle Cy frowned a tiny frown. "That's hard to believe. She talks about you all the time."

"It's true. She called me antisocial. Like I have a disease." He held his breath.

Uncle Cy steepled his long fingers to his lips. "Well, if that's a disease, I've had it all my life."

Ware swelled with so much hope he couldn't reply.

"Yeah." Uncle Cy nodded. "Just then, it sounded like you were describing me. Actually, it sounded like you were describing everyone I work with—the musicians, cinematographers, the writers. The whole tribe. Sounded like you were describing an artist."

And just as abruptly, Ware's hope was dashed. He looked at the floor. "I can't draw."

Uncle Cy shrugged. "Lots of kinds of artists, you know." He crossed his arms behind his head. "When you were just a rug rat, I came to see Big Deal. Your family was there, too. We were moving her into that Sunset Palms place. I took you out one day, get you out of your parents' hair, took you to the ocean. First time you'd seen it. You went rigid, as if you'd been electrified. Eyes like *this*. And you kept reaching for the water, wanting to drink it."

Ware felt a shock of recognition at the story, the way he felt whenever he passed a mirror unexpectedly.

But of course wanting to drink the ocean would sound crazy. Especially to people like Uncle Cy, who



went to film festivals with celebrities, who was practically a celebrity himself, and who sent postcards from places like Morocco and Hong Kong and Calcutta, places you had to look up on a map. “I was a weird little kid, huh?”

“Weird? No. That’s when I thought maybe you’d be an artist.”

Ware gripped the counter. “What do you mean?”

“First time I knew it about myself, I was a kid, too. Maybe eight or nine. Friend of mine had a new kitten. Its paw pads were so perfect, like shiny little coffee beans. I had the urge to swallow them. That’s when I knew. Not that I was an artist—I hadn’t figured that out yet. Just that I was different, and this difference would be important my whole life.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s like this: artists see something that moves us, we need to take it in, make it part of ourselves. And then give it back to the world, translated, in a way the world can see it, too. That make sense?”

*You see that? Wow.* “Yes.”

“Artists need solitude to do that. And quiet. By the way, you’ll have to fight for that—the world loves noise.”

Ware fell back against the cupboard. He hadn't realized how tightly he'd been holding himself since he'd uttered the word "antisocial" out loud. "I get it."

"I know you do. You showed me today."

"I did?"

"Your lot. The moat, the sundial, that stained-glass window. You're transforming it. That's what artists do."

Ware remembered his drawing of the escaping tiger. *Not everyone can be an artist.* "But that's not me. I told you—I can't draw. Or write or make music, or anything."

"The lot is your art right now. You're *creating* it." A slow smile spread over his face. "I have a hunch. Tell you what. I'm going to give you a movie camera. Nothing fancy, just the one I travel with. I'll show you how to use it, teach you how to do some easy editing. You bring that camera with you to the lot and film what you're doing there. I'll be back in a month—you show me."

"So . . . you won't tell my parents?"

"Sorry, little man. I think I have to. Or you do."

"No. If they knew, my dad would worry. My job this summer is to not worry them. And besides, Mom would send me back to Rec, and then Jolene would be alone with everything. I've made a promise to her. Please."

Uncle Cy rubbed his forehead, eyes squeezed shut. Then he slid off the counter. "All right. The community center is next door. Go there if anything happens, or if you even think something's not right. You stay safe."

Just then, the door opened and Ware's mother walked in. "Evening, you two. Having a nice chat?"

"Evening, Little Deal." Uncle Cy hugged his sister. "We are, in fact."

Ware's mom poured some iced tea and sat at the table.

Uncle Cy raised his beer like a toast. "Got some good news for you tonight, Little Deal." He winked at Ware.

"Oh? What's that?"

"Turns out you're raising an artist."

She lifted her eyebrows toward Ware. "That so?"

"That's so. Know what that makes you?"

She shook her head, sipped some tea. "What's that make me, Cyrus?"

Uncle Cy beamed. "Lucky."

That night, Ware cut up the papaya and passed it around for dessert.

"It's good, right?" he asked after everyone had had some. "Really sweet."

“It is,” his uncle agreed. “Extremely sweet.”

“Plus smooth. It’s a very smooth fruit, don’t you think?”

“Yes, Ware. It’s remarkably smooth,” his mother said, giving him a funny look.

“It tastes kind of like a cantaloupe, but more cantaloupey, right?”

His father cocked his head. “Did you grow this yourself? Are you a papaya farmer now or something?”

Ware dipped his face, but he smiled to himself. He was a papaya farmer now. Or something.



A camera lens reveals how special things are, even things that appear ordinary. The way you could walk all day on a beach full of gray stones, but it's only when you pick one up and study it on your palm that you notice how there isn't another one like it.

Everything begged to be filmed, to get that attention. "Don't worry, you'll cut out anything extra once you know your story," Uncle Cy had advised. "First, film whatever you want."

"What are you going to put in your movie?" Jolene asked, the first day.

Ware stopped to think before he answered. "Whatever moves me."

"Moves you?"

“Whatever makes me feel something. That’s what I’ll film.”

And that was what he did.

He filmed Jolene easing a cylinder of soil from a ChipNutz can, so carefully the sprout in the middle never wobbled, and patting it into place in the trench. He filmed her hoisting Mrs. Stavros’s hammer over her head, smashing it down true. He filmed her fist-pumping at the crack, every time.

He filmed a line of ants carrying tiny bits of watermelon away from the compost pile; a frayed green ribbon fluttering from the flattened slide. He sorted through the boxes of photographs and took out the scenes that castle ladies would have chosen for their tapestries. He lined them up and zoomed in on each. He chose a single papaya and shot a close-up of it every day. “You’re going to be a star,” he’d promised the lucky plant. “Going to grow up right on camera.”

Before long, the camera felt like part of Ware’s body. Each day, he would have kept on filming right past the bus if his alarm hadn’t gone off. And when he got home, he went straight to the computer to see what he’d caught.

Lighting was an issue: some things looked washed out

under the glaring sun; things in the shade weren't bright enough. A piece of poster board solved both problems: used to block the sun like a visor, or covered in tinfoil as a reflector. The poster board also made a great backdrop for subjects that had seemed lost. He wrapped his T-shirt over the camera's microphone when street noise interfered and began to experiment with the buttons—focus, frame rate, white balance.

By the end of the week, the film was matching what his mind imagined. *You see that? Wow*, every frame seemed to say.

Uncle Cy had said the hardest part would be editing. "You have to leave a lot of great stuff on the cutting-room floor."

Ware wasn't ready to edit yet, because he didn't know his story. But Uncle Cy had talked a lot about *dramatic turning points*, and he hoped he was getting some of those.

"I wish I'd seen the wrecking ball," he said to Jolene one day.

"Nuh-uh, you don't. It was awful."

"Okay, maybe I don't. But I wish I had that film."

Jolene shrugged. "It was on the news. You could probably look it up."

That afternoon, Ware did. Not only was there news footage, but people in the crowd had posted clips, too.

Jolene was right. It was awful. Swing, crash, BOOM. A cannon to the heart every time.

But it moved him.

He put the camera up to the computer screen, and he filmed.





## *thirty-six*

W are sat on a cinder block, chin on his palms. Uncle Cy had said he was transforming the lot, but was he?

The old playground was a thriving garden now. He'd raked the overgrown grass of the front lawn into medieval designs. He'd finished the stained-glass window and was making a suit of armor out of some beat-up cookware and a roll of tinfoil. The moat wall was rising and would soon be full of water. But right in the middle, the wrecked building was wrong.

The shape was fine, castle-like already with its tower and chunky walls. It was the color. Pink was all wrong for a castle. Castles rose from the surrounding land, made from its native materials. Clay, stone. Castles were the color of rocks.

Rocks.

Ware got up and walked over to Jolene's garden. He kicked at the mountain of lousy dirt Jolene had dug out of her trenches. "What did you call this stuff?"

"Rock dust. It's useless."

"Maybe not."

He went up into the church and gathered a dented spaghetti pot, a mixing spoon, and a mop. He filled the pot with rock dust, hosed in some water, and stirred.

He lugged the pot down to the west wall of the church, still in the shade, and began smearing the slurry onto a patch of wall. As soon as it was pasted on, it slid down, leaving a sick pink track.

If the mud slid off in the dry air, how would it ever hold up through a summer of evening rains?

Ware remembered a sand sculpture exhibition he'd gone to the year before. "Elmer's glue," the winner had whispered behind her hand, when he'd asked how it held together. "Mix it in with the water."

He went back up into the church and retrieved a whole case of glue. The labels read *Shure-Stuck*, not *Elmer's*, but glue was glue.

He mixed it in and started over, painting the sticky

mud on with the mop. Every once in a while, he noticed that Jolene got up and made a show of stretching, but he knew she was spying on him.

It kept him going.

Two hours later, stopping only to film his progress, he'd covered the entire wall up to where he could reach.

He solved the problem of the high parts in medieval style. He had just finished setting up the Y-shaped branch, the bungee cords, and the colander when Jolene gave up spying and came over.

She studied the muddled church wall. "You're insane," she said matter-of-factly, as if reporting that the sky was blue.

Ware stepped back and saw what she saw. "I guess so," he had to agree.

"I mean, really. This is exactly what's wrong with you."

"You're probably right."

She pointed at the catapult.

"Basically, a giant slingshot," he mumbled, head down.

"Show me."

Ware filled a couple of sandwich bags with the mud,

placed them in the colander, pulled back, and let them fly. The baggies burst against the church wall with a satisfying *splat*.

“*Literally* insane.”

“I know.”

Jolene shook her head with a tragic eye roll. Then she pushed him aside. “I’d better help.”

Jolene, it turned out, was a catapult natural. But even with two of them hurling stucco bombs, it took a while. The noon sun was just peeking over the ramparts when the final brown splat covered the final pink spot.

They walked back to his block and sat on it together.

Instead of smooth and pink, the west face of the church was rough and stone-colored, convincingly medieval. A few of the baggies had stuck, resulting in random glossy patches that reflected the sunlight in a jaunty way.

“Wow,” Jolene said.

“Wow,” Ware agreed.

“Don’t castles have flags?” Jolene asked after another minute of reverent admiration.

“They do.” Cut into triangles, run through with sticks, the red-checked tablecloths would be perfect. As Ware imagined them snapping from the castle parapets,

he suddenly saw knights dashing below them on armored steeds, heard the clash of broadswords, and smelled pigs roasting over smoky fires.

Jolene poked him. "I said, people would see them from the street."

"Oh, I was drifting off. Sorry."

Ware caught himself. It wasn't true. He wasn't sorry. "I was drifting off," he repeated, "and it was great. But you're right, no flags."

"And you can't mud up the front of the church."

That one was harder. "No," he promised at last. "Not yet."



## *thirty-seven*

The next morning, Ware hung out on the oak branch for an extra moment, admiring the mudded wall. The church now looked strong and defiant, like the best castles, like a fist of rock bursting up through the ground.

As he was about to drop into the lot, he heard the squeal of car brakes. The squeal sounded urgent. Also familiar.

He glanced back. He stifled a panicked gasp.

His mother.

Ware ducked deeper into the leaves and watched. She shut off the engine, and when she turned to open the car door, he dropped from the branch and darted behind the bus kiosk.

His mother slung her bag over her shoulder and

started up the walkway to the community center door at an extremely purpose-driven pace. It looked like the purpose was to find out if her son was where he was supposed to be.

“Mom,” he yelled. “Over here!”

She turned, a hand shielding her eyes. “Ware!”

Ware hurried to intercept her on the walkway. This would be a lot worse inside with all the Rec kids watching.

“Ware, I got to the end of the street and I realized—”

“I know, I know,” he began, hands raised.

“—that I didn’t give you an August bus pass. I was worried you’d . . .” She pulled a new pass from her bag. “Wait. What do mean, you know?”

“So . . .” He looked back at the oak. How could he even begin?

A clanging at the bike rack bought him some time. A girl locked her bike and then skipped up the walk. Ware raised a hand. The girl looked at him strangely, but she waved back and Ware breathed.

“Oh, my goodness,” his mother said. “You realized it too! You thought, ‘It’s August first, how will I get home today?’ so you went over to the bus stop to figure it out!”

“Actually . . .” Ware searched his mother’s face. The little lines that had creased her forehead all summer had relaxed. “Right,” he said. “I thought, ‘Hey, maybe there’s a sign in there or something.’”

She reached out as if to stroke his face, then pulled back as if she remembered how old he was.

Just then, a car pulled up to the curb. The tall-necked boy, Ben, got out. He leaned down and smiled into the car at the driver.

And once more, Ware recognized himself in Ben and winced. Because the smile Ben wore was the same one he used to flash every day he’d been dropped off here, at least the days he’d actually gone inside. *Don’t worry, I’m fine*, the smile said. *Super popular, just like all the other kids*. Why didn’t anyone else see how fake it was?

The tall-necked boy’s smile, when he turned and saw Ware, was real.

“Hey, Ben,” Ware said, smiling back.

“Hey,” Ben said. “See you inside.”

Ware turned back to his mother and took the bus pass. “I should go.”

His mother took a step and then stopped. “You’ve changed so much this summer. You’re like a new person.”



Ware was caught off guard. "I'm really trying to do that, Mom. Be a new person. I know you want me to change."

"I see that. You're happy every morning when I drop you off here. You haven't complained about Rec once. You're making friends here. And it's as if you've changed inside, too."

"You think so?"

"Well, thinking ahead about the bus pass? It's as if you're more *here*."

"What do you mean, *here*?"

"You know. You were always . . . kind of off in your own world."

*Off in your own world.* His mother had never said that before, at least not in that blaming way, as if it was something he should be ashamed of. Someone else had said it that way recently—he didn't remember who, but he hadn't liked it then, either.

He *had* changed this summer. He was spending more time off in his own world. And it turned out, he didn't feel ashamed about it. Turned out, he really liked it there.



## *thirty-eight*

Back in the Middle Ages, moats were disgusting, Ware knew. A moat was basically the castle's sewer. But this was no ordinary moat they were making. This was an enormous, circular get-yourself-reborn tub. And whatever holy water was, the one thing it wasn't was dirty.

"It's almost time to fill the moat," he broached the subject with Jolene. "We need to put in some filter plants now, to keep it clean."

Jolene shrugged. "We promised to cover the pavement with water. Nobody said anything about it being clean." She drove another nail hole into the ChipNutz can on her lap.

"But you don't want dirty water near your papayas, do you? We need those filter plants."

"The garden is uphill. Don't care."

"Dirty water might attract rats."

Jolene raised her hammer and bared her teeth. She looked like something rats should be afraid of.

Ware wasn't giving up, but he was temporarily out of arguments. He picked up a can. Another pile of them had appeared overnight. "Where do you get these?"

Jolene hitched a shoulder to the Grotto Bar. "Walter."

"What are they, anyway? The picture on the cans looks like bark. What do they taste like?"

Jolene wobbled the hammer in the air, as if asking the universe for help. "They taste, they taste . . . like bacon and peanuts and french fries, all at the same time."

That sounded too good to be true. He put the can down and picked up his cause again.

"Polluted water will smell awful. And if it smells, someone will complain. And if someone complains . . ."

"Oh, all right!" Jolene got to her feet. She slapped on her hat and holstered her trowel. "What kind of plants?"

Ware began to list the ones he'd found in his research. But when Jolene blew out her bangs with an impatient

puff after just a few examples, he quit. "Basically, we need the kind that grows where there's water sometimes, but sometimes not."

"Well, I know a place like that," Jolene grumbled, as if she were admitting it at gunpoint. "Behind the school. It's got water after it rains, but then it goes dry."

"Sounds like a detention pond. Let's go see it."

Jolene said okay, but then she ducked into the hedge.

"I meant today," Ware called.

Jolene reappeared, patted the bib of her overalls, then trotted down to the front of the lot.

Ware followed and they climbed over the fence.

Jolene stopped at the notice. She shuddered.

"It's going to be okay," Ware said. "We'll make the moat, and then Ashley will get her father to stop the auction." He nodded as if it were a great plan.

But inside he wondered.



## *thirty-nine*

Jolene stuck her pointer finger through the chain-link fence.

Ware peered down the slope. An oval pond nestled alongside a road. "That's a detention pond, all right. I can see the overflow grate from here. That plant down there, whatever it is, that's what we need." He worked a sneaker toe into the wire and scaled the fence.

At the marshy edge of the water, he crouched and splayed a little plant across his fingers. "Waterweed," he announced.

"Looks like the stuff in aquariums," Jolene said, coming up behind him.

Ware nodded gloomily. "That's probably where we'd have to get it—a pet supply place. I hope we can

buy enough. I only have forty-seven dollars.”

“*Buy* enough?” Jolene sputtered. She slid her black garbage bag out of her bib pocket and produced her trowel.

Ware batted them away. “That’s stealing!” he hissed.

Jolene snorted. She fell to her knees and troweled out a ragged circle of turf, then dropped the clump, ripe with the scent of mud, into the bag.

Ware jumped into guard position between Jolene and the road. “Okay, but if anyone stops us, we’ll put it all back.”

“No one will stop us.”

And Jolene was right—no one did. Not that trip, and not on the other three trips they made, although Ware’s heart pounded every step. “You know what this bag looks like it’s full of? A human body, that’s what,” he warned each time. “You’d better hope we don’t get stopped by the police.”

“You spend a lot of time imagining things that aren’t going to happen,” Jolene said.

Ware thought he heard a hint of admiration in the complaint. Of course, maybe he imagined it.

They tucked the tufts around the edges of the

foundation. Jolene donated a shovelful of compost to feed each clump, but you could see how it cost her.

“We have to water them now,” she said.

“Maybe not.” Ware pointed to the sky. Piles of black clouds were rolling in from the west. Evening thunderstorm, coming early.

He glanced over at the community center. It was dry inside, but . . .

He saw Jolene look up at the door at the top of the stairs beside the Grotto Bar’s sign. He knew she was weighing the same trade-off about her apartment.

“Nope,” he said. “Follow me.”

Jolene shot him a skeptical look, but she followed him onto the foundation and over to the big kitchen table. A crack of lightning split the dark sky, and she scrambled under.

Ware hurried over to the wall of closets. He grabbed a couple of tablecloths and the box with the candle stubs and lighter, and ran back.

He draped the cloths over the table, weighted them with bricks, and ducked in as the first drops hit his shoulders.

Jolene sat with her knees drawn up to her chin.

*“Under the Table,”* she said in a voice that clearly implied both capitalization and italics, as if she were christening the spot. She watched as one by one he melted the candles’ bases and stuck them to the floor in an arc on his left side, an arc on Jolene’s right, and then lit them all.

Rain drummed on the tabletop. Wind gusted shingles around the deck and flickered the candles. A curl of air blew a fresh earth smell from Jolene’s garden into the wax-scented cave. Ware pulled the tablecloth snug. “Think your papayas will be okay? They’re kind of . . . floppy.”

“Sometimes it’s good to be floppy. The wind can’t snap you.”

A lightning bolt struck so close that the air under the table flared silver. The smell changed to something blue and electric. Thunder cracked, a deep thud Ware felt in his chest. He edged the slightest bit closer to Jolene.

The arcs of candles surrounded them like parentheses. As if he and Jolene were extra information.

“Extra information,” he risked, eyes on his knees. “My parents wish they had a different kid.”

“Extra information,” Jolene replied, as if she understood parentheses, too. “My aunt wishes she didn’t have a kid at all.”





## forty

“Cutworms.” Jolene glowered down at the papayas she’d planted a few days before. Half of them were crumpled to the ground. She let out a string of swears.

“I don’t think you should say those things here,” Ware muttered.

“I told you, the holy’s gone.” She swore again. “They’re chewing through the stems. Mrs. Stavros says I need collars around them. She says make the collars out of paper cups. Do you have any?”

“Maybe.” Ware climbed onto the foundation and rummaged through the kitchen junk. He trotted back with a box labeled *Communion Cups*. “Are they too small?”

“Nuh-uh. Cutworms are caterpillars. Caterpillars

have pretty short legs.” She handed Ware a rusty knife. “Cut off the bottoms, slit the sides.”

Ware placed one of the miniature plastic cups on a cinder block and started sawing.

Jolene knelt and troweled out a dandelion, then carried it over to the front walkway to transplant. “They’re nice flowers. Not their fault they got born in the wrong place,” she’d answered when he first asked her about it. “They shouldn’t get killed for it.”

Ware thought the dandelion saving was ridiculous, but he did like how it dressed up the front of his castle.

A minute later, she came back. “Know how they got rid of trash in New York City, back in the day?”

Ware wasn’t in the mood. He bent over his knife. Dripping sweat stung his eyes, the blade was dull, and the cups too slippery. He was wrecking about half the ones he attempted.

“Pigs, that’s how,” Jolene said, as if he’d begged her to go on. “Like, on Mondays, the people in one neighborhood threw their garbage into the street and the city sent a herd of pigs through. On Tuesdays, another neighborhood. Like that.”

“Well, great,” Ware said, not looking up. “How

many of these do you need? I'm getting a blister."

"Great? *Great?* No, not so great *for the pigs*. Can you imagine the kind of stuff people threw away back then?"

Ware shrugged and kept on butchering cups. Communion cups were supposed to hold the blood of Jesus—he knew that much. He dropped the knife and looked up at the queen palms. They seemed to shake their fronds in disapproval.

"Jolene, do you ever think the holiness is still here, but it's hiding? And we're supposed to find it?"

Jolene smacked his sneaker with her trowel. "How would a pig know if someone threw out something poisonous?"

Ware went back to his sawing.

"Or gross. Like . . ."

Ware realized too late where she was heading.

"Like a *human hip?*"

He finally looked at her. "You're obsessed."

"Yes!" She was beaming in smug victory. "So give up. Call her and ask her where they are."

"I can't. She's at some rehab place near here, but she doesn't have a phone." Ware poked at the new blister, raw on the ball of his thumb.

Jolene sat back on her heels. "Is that where they took them out?"

Surrounded by mutilated communion cups, Ware felt uneasy at the question. "No. That was somewhere else. She's just there now."

"Well, what about other people there? Do they have stuff gone?"

Ware squirmed. "Her roommate only has one kidney. But maybe she was born without the other one."

Jolene's eyes lit up. "A kidney," she mused. "Anyone else?"

Nothing good would come from answering Jolene's question. Ware knew this. But he'd overheard his mother tell his father something last night, and out it came. "An old guy there is missing a leg. He rolls his wheelchair over to my grandmother at lunch and invites her to go horizontal dancing. She throws her Jell-O at him."

Jolene dropped the cup she was holding. "A hip, a kidney, *and* a leg?" she demanded. "All in one place?"

Ware nodded again. He squeezed his eyes shut and waited.

"Get the address," Jolene said. "We go there tomorrow."



*forty-one*

“**W**hat? What’s so interesting about a candy bar wrapper?”

Jolene flattened the wrapper on the bench as carefully as if it were a treasure map.

Ware pulled his cap down. He’d been nervous every minute since Jolene’s decision, worrying about everything that could go wrong. As long as Jolene and Big Deal never met, he reassured himself for the hundredth time, things would probably be fine.

He risked a glance back at the community center. At noontime Ms. Sanchez should be busy trying to keep milk carton missiles from launching, but you never knew.

Beside him, Jolene bent over the wrapper.

“There was a cat that lived next door once,” he said.

“He used to stare at the wall. For hours. We think he must have been hit on the head when he was a kitten.” Number five in the Knights’ Code was: *Thou shalt never give wanton offense*. Ware knew he was giving wanton offense right now, but he couldn’t help it.

Jolene placed a finger on the wrapper. She raised her head. Her sunglasses looked like discs of ice. “Or maybe he was a genius cat. Maybe he figured out that if he stared at the wall long enough, you’d quit bothering him, let him be a cat, instead of wanting him to be something else.”

Ware checked his watch. Still two minutes before the bus. “I wouldn’t do that. I don’t do that.”

“Yes, you do. You want a wrecked church to be a castle. You want a bunch of busted cookie sheets to be a suit of armor. I saw that screen—you want some broken glass to be a jewel-y window. You want the world to be fair, when it’s not.”

Ware couldn’t argue the last point. He did want the world to be fair. It wasn’t fair that more people didn’t want the world to be fair. “You think my window looks jewel-y?”

Jolene smoothed the wrapper, bent even closer.

“Seriously. What are you doing?”

She sputtered up her bangs. “I’m trying to know where this has been. Before. Like, did the paper come from an apple tree way up north? This blue color, did it come from turquoise out west? Everything was something else before. Sometimes, if you look hard enough, you can see it. The whole story of a thing.”

The bus fumed up then. Jolene dropped the wrapper in the trash. Ware followed her onto the bus, thinking. He watched the buildings roll by, each built of things that used to be something else.

“Jolene, if everything was something else before, then everything will be something else afterward.”

“Of course. Recycling.”

“Even people.”

“Especially people.”



*E*verything was something else before and will be something else after. The concept had expanded so explosively in his brain on the bus ride that Ware forgot to worry about bringing Jolene to the rehab place.

As soon as he walked into the bright lobby of the New Horizons Rehabilitation Center, though, he remembered. He aimed a warning look over his shoulder.

Jolene raised clasped hands to her chin and fluttered her lids innocently. Which was the opposite of reassuring.

"We're here to visit my grandmother," he told the woman behind the registration desk, who was eating an egg salad sandwich.

The woman paused with her sandwich in midair. She wore a pale blue scarf splotted with yellow stains, as if



she ate egg salad sandwiches a lot. Her eyes were squinty chips behind crinkly black lashes. It looked as if she was peering at him through a nest of spiders.

"My grandmother. We're here to visit her," Ware repeated. Then he gave her Big Deal's name. Spiders made him nervous.

The woman put down her sandwich. "Isn't that the nicest thing." Somehow, she made it sound as if what she really meant was *Now, here's a big pain in the neck, just when I'm trying to have my lunch*. She pushed a clipboard across the desk. "Sign in here."

Ware filled in their names, then turned.

Jolene was halfway through the lobby. Ware dropped the pen and caught up with her.

"No fooling around. You're just here to get that . . . *information* you want. Now, we should meet back in the lobby by—"

"Trash can!" Jolene pointed down a side hall.

And she was off.



## *forty-three*

Ware stood in the doorway, overwhelmed by how much he'd missed his grandmother.

The beds in the room had metal rails, like giant cribs. Lying in hers, Big Deal looked too small, like a wrinkled baby. Her hair, which until this moment he had not suspected was a wig, hung off a lamp on the bedside table. Her scalp was covered with soft gray fuzz, as if the wrinkled baby were dusty.

As she whuffled a small snore, the skin on her neck trembled. The tremble hurt something in his chest. He hadn't constituted himself the defender of his grandmother's weakness when it counted, but he could do it now. He tiptoed in and eased the sheet up to her chin.

Big Deal startled awake. "Oh, Ware! What a nice surprise." She looked toward the door.

"I came by myself. Mom's working a million hours."

"She is. They both are. Poor them." Big Deal plucked her wig off the lamp and tugged it on. She looked like herself instantly. The magic of hair.

"I'm sorry I left you alone that night, Big Deal," he plunged in. "I should have known you might fall. I should have—"

Big Deal waved it off. "That's ridiculous. How could you have known?"

How could he have known? That was the question, all right. "I wish I had, though. Maybe you wouldn't be here now. Is it terrible here, Big Deal?"

"Oh, no, it's all right here." Big Deal craned her head toward the door. "Although a person would think she could get a little bacon now and then," she added, loud enough that a passing orderly chuckled.

Ware dropped into the red plastic chair beside the bed. He tipped his head to the other crib. "Where's your roommate?"

"Dialysis."

He pointed to what looked like a television screen

behind his grandmother, glowing with squiggly lines.

“What’s that?”

“That? Oh, that’s proof.”

“Proof?”

“That I’m alive. I got a little dizzy this morning, so they hooked me up. This is the kind of place”—she leaned to the door again and cupped a hand around her mouth—“*the kind of place where you can’t get any bacon*, where you need to prove you’re alive. Hand me my bag, would you, Ware?”

Ware passed her the purse, and she dug around until she found a lipstick. While she was applying it, he thought about the kind of place that would require a person to prove she was alive. Not a good one. “Were you scared?”

“You mean about this?” She patted her sides.

Ware nodded.

“I suppose a bit. But then your mother came. It helps a lot not to be alone. Also Mrs. Sauer—she barely left my side. She visits me twice a week, too. That’s something—a two-hour drive, each way.”

Ware scowled, then quickly rearranged his face.

“I saw that look. What do you have against Rita?”

Ware twitched. "*She* has something against *me*."

Big Deal waved a hand. "Oh, she's a little vinegary is all."

Ware knew he should drop it. He was here to make his grandmother feel better, not get her stirred up. But number eight in the Knights' Code was *Thou shalt do battle against unfairness whenever faced with it*, and he was faced with it now. "What about those twin girls visiting next door? Mrs. Sauer made them a cake. I saw her bring it over. So she's nice to girls."

Big Deal patted the sheet until she found the bed remote. She pressed a button and rose majestically until she was looking right in Ware's face. "Those girls were quiet. Barely came outside, except to make a puzzle on the patio the one time. Who knows, maybe Rita likes quiet and out of sight is all."

Ware tapped his fingers on the chair arm. He really should let it go, but he couldn't. "No. I think she doesn't like *me*." Suddenly, he remembered who it was who'd said *Off in his own world* about him in that blaming way. Mrs. Sauer, when he'd climbed out of the pool. "She acted as if I'd done something wrong, Big Deal."

"If you think that, you should ask her next time you

see her. Now, speaking of girls who are quiet and out of sight, who's your friend?"

Ware felt himself redden. "My friend?"

"The one who's been skulking around the hall the whole time you've been here, peeking in. Overalls, blond, could use a meal."

Ware got up and leaned into the hall. There was no sign of Jolene. "You saw her?"

"See those mirrors up high?"

He looked up. He nodded.

"They're so the orderlies can see the gurneys coming around the corner, avoid crack-ups. I may have accidentally adjusted a couple with my cane. I see everything that happens on this floor."

"Oh. Well, she did come with me, but she's not my friend. And she's sure not quiet."

"No?" Big Deal seemed to grow larger, as if she weren't going to fit in that crib much longer. "Well, go call her in, the little skulker. Let's hear what she has to say for herself."

Ware sighed, but he got up. There was no talking Big Deal out of something once she'd decided.

He found Jolene hanging out of a dumpster in back

of the building. He tugged her overalls and she slid to the ground.

She held her arm up to display a sling as if it were a diamond bracelet. "Just thrown away. People."

"My grandmother sent me to get you. I can say you left."

"She wants to see me?" Jolene pulled off the sling and stuffed it into her pocket.

"She's kind of *direct*," Ware warned. "She wants to know everything."

"Me too," Jolene said. "Maybe I'll finally get some answers."



## *forty-four*

Jolene was a whole lot more polite than Ware had guessed she could be. “Pleased to meet you, hot one out there today, what did they do with your old hip? Ma’am. Er . . . please,” she said after the introductions.

Big Deal tugged her wig around, as if it was suddenly too tight. “Well, hmm. I had those hips for seventy-one years. I don’t know why I didn’t think to ask where they were taking them.”

“That’s all right, ma’am,” Jolene said, all soothing comfort. “But can you ask now? Thank you, please.”

Big Deal shook her head with what looked like genuine regret. “The surgery was in a hospital back home. I’m only recuperating here. Now, tell me why you want to know.” She raised her eyebrows at Jolene.



“Uh-oh,” Ware muttered.

Big Deal shot him a look that reminded him he used to be afraid of her. She smiled encouragingly at Jolene.

Unbelievable. His own grandmother, taking the side of a stranger she’d known for a single minute.

Jolene sat up primly. “Things get used up or broken. Or they’re too hard to take care of. But that doesn’t mean they’re trash. I like to know if something gets thrown away it’s done right. Respectful-like. Ma’am.”

Big Deal nodded. “Very admirable.”

Jolene raised her chin toward the empty bed. “How about, excuse me, your roommate? Do you know where her kidney went?”

“Sorry. The subject hasn’t arisen. But I’ll tell you what. There’s a fellow here knows things. Name of Franklin, goes around delivering meals and rustling up blankets. He used to work in a big hospital over in Tampa. Go find Franklin—you’ll get some answers.”

Jolene mumbled a string of thank-you-ma’ams and bolted.

“She’s obsessed with how stuff gets thrown away,” Ware said apologetically when she was gone. “It’s like she thinks trash has feelings.”

Big Deal perked up. "Why is that?"

Ware shrugged.

"You haven't asked?"

"Ha!" was all he could manage at that terrible idea.

Big Deal cocked her head. "Girlfriend trouble?"

"No, she's not my . . . she lives behind the community center. I only help her with her gardening. That's all." He got up and looked out the window. This line of questioning could bring him dangerously close to the subject of where he spent his days. "That's a nice tree down there. Have you seen that tree?"

"What's her family like?"

"She lives with her aunt. I'll bet a lot of birds land in that tree. Did you know that a sandhill crane weighs ten pounds and it lands feet-first?"

"An aunt? What about her parents?"

"I don't know. All I know about it is that her aunt doesn't want her there."

Big Deal sat up. "That is terrible. That is a crime. Why doesn't she?"

Ware spread his hands.

"Ware, there is a considerable lot you don't know about a person who came all the way here with you."

"It's just . . . Jolene. If she wanted to tell me something, she'd tell me."

"That sounds like an assumption, Ware. Don't make assumptions about people. Maybe she can't guess that you're interested. It's never wrong to ask."

Ware pondered the idea. Maybe he'd try. Probably not.

He pulled the chair out, but Big Deal waved him away.

"You go catch up with her. I'm tired. But come visit again. And bring her with you." Big Deal lowered the bed and nestled her head into the pillow. The proof machine beeped in a reassuring manner. She closed her eyes and smiled. "Little skulker."

Ware could still hear her chuckling as the elevator door closed.



## *forty-five*

**W**are checked the waterweeds every morning for a week. The new plants didn't seem upset they'd been kidnapped, but they didn't seem thrilled about it either. He filmed them each day, and each day they looked the same: wet and green.

The new wall grew taller around them, like an anxious crowd rising on their toes to see better. When it was finished, Ware stalled. "Three feet is a lot of water. A lot of pressure," he said. "We need a back-up wall around this deep part, just in case."

They built the second wall inside the first, leaving a gap that they filled with garbage-bagged gravel. And each day that week, too, Ware checked the waterweeds.

Still wet and green.

Ware thought about the proof machine in his grandmother's room. He would like to have one above those waterweeds.

And then finally, finally, he noticed something different. He scrolled back to the first day he'd filmed them to be sure, then ran to get Jolene. "See here on the fringes?" he asked. "How the green is lighter?"

Jolene dropped to her knees and raised her sunglasses to inspect them closer. "Yep. They're growing again."

"They're growing again!" he crowed, two fists in the air. "We did it. Life!"

Jolene blew her bangs out and rolled her eyes. "It's not like you invented growing," she scoffed. But she was fighting a smile.

He gave a sprig of waterweed a gentle tug, and the little plant held firm. *I'm not going anywhere*, it seemed to say. *I like it right here.*

"It's time," he declared. "Let's fill the moat."



“**Y**ou never asked? All this time, you never *asked*?”  
“It’s water. Water’s free.”

Ware folded his arms and narrowed his eyes.

“Okay, fine,” Jolene said. “We’ll go ask Walter.”

Ware looked up at the *Grotto Bar* sign. The flamingo’s beak suddenly looked extremely sharp. “We?”

Now Jolene folded *her* arms and narrowed *her* eyes.

“Okay. We.” Ware followed Jolene over the fence and across the parking lot. Jolene pulled open the back door and marched in, but Ware stopped to prepare himself. He was walking into a bar. An actual bar. He wanted to etch every detail into his memory.

The bar was cool and dark. While his eyes adjusted, he drew in the smells—beer and something that smelled

like it used to be beer. And then the sounds—whirring fans, clacking billiard balls, a song that seemed to consist entirely of the words “Without youuuuuu . . .”

The bar itself was an L-shaped island of wood. A mirror behind it reflected hundreds of bottles.

And two kids. Jolene looked like herself, but Ware was embarrassed to see that he could have been auditioning for a roller-coaster commercial. He closed his mouth and blinked his eyeballs back into their sockets.

A bear-sized man behind the bar was filling a mug from a tap built into the mirror. His head was shaved and a rainbow tattoo encircled his neck like a halo that had slipped. He glanced up in the mirror and winked at Jolene. “Hey, Sprout,” he said over his shoulder. “You and your friend pull up a stool. I’ll be right there.”

Just in time, Ware saw that this was a joke, since the stools were bolted to the floor. He chuckled in what he hoped was a manly way.

Jolene shot him a puzzled look. She climbed onto a stool and he took the one beside her.

The bartender came up and leaned in. His hands, splayed on the bar, were the size of baseball mitts. “The usual?” he asked.

When Jolene nodded, he grabbed two mugs and shot something pale and sparkling into them from a spigot. He arranged a couple of orange slices on the rims and set the mugs down on coasters that said, hilariously, *Bottoms Up!*

“Walter, can we have some water?” Jolene asked.

Walter tipped his head to Ware. “Who’s we?”

“This is Ware. I told you about him.”

“Good to meet you, Ware,” Walter said. He picked up two more mugs and made for the sink.

“No, I mean outside,” Jolene stopped him. “Can we have some water from your hose?”

“Of course, Sprout. It’s hot out there. Take as much as you want—you don’t have to ask.”

Jolene shot Ware a look of triumph, and Ware picked up his mug. His first drink in a bar. Ginger ale. It tasted completely different, way better than any ginger ale he’d ever had. Possibly it was champagne.

When Jolene bent to her drink, Walter stretched and peered at the booths along the far wall. Ware thought he looked a little worried, but then Walter leaned in toward Jolene with a smile. “Got some more cans for you out in the stockroom. While you’re out there, flatten the boxes for me, take them out to recycling, okay?”



Jolene grabbed her mug and pushed through a set of swinging doors.

A bald man at the far end of the bar raised a hand. "Hey, Walter. Fill 'er up," he called.

While Walter was gone, Ware swiveled to check out the customers. Four men playing pool, two guys in green uniforms hunkered over beer mugs a few stools away, two older women perched at a high-top table playing cards.

Counting the bald man, nine people.

Just then, another woman's head rose over the back of a booth. Her hair sprang out in a crown—the yellowest Ware had ever seen, but black at the center. She took a sip from a green bottle, swept a slow gaze around the place, and then plopped back down as if what she'd seen had exhausted her.

So there were ten of them—a dozen counting himself and Jolene. It had looked like more, because of all the mirrors. People in bars must really like to look at themselves, Ware concluded, because besides the giant mirror behind the bar, the walls were covered with them, all advertising beers in ornate golden letters. Some of the mirrors were also clocks. Ware was surprised that people

would want to look at themselves with time sweeping over their faces, but there were many mysteries about bars he had yet to unravel.

He twirled his stool back to the bar and noticed what he'd missed before: blue plastic bowls were spaced every couple of feet.

ChipNutz. At last. He reached for the closest bowl, but just then Walter came back.

"Sorry. My client had a sensitive issue that needed my ears." Walter tugged his ear. "Professional listener. Mostly, that's my job. And, of course, every so often to offer a refreshing beverage."

Ware pointed to the bowl down the line. "And ChipNutz." He secretly pinched the side of his thigh. He was in an actual bar, having a conversation with an actual bartender.

Walter snapped his fingers. "Yes! Never underestimate the value of having something to crunch when you're trying to clarify a problem."

Walter picked up a white towel and began to polish the wood in slow, perfect circles. "Say you come in. I get you something to drink, then I ask, 'How you doin', pal?' You take a sip, then you say, 'Doin' okay, Walter,

thanks. But I got this problem.' Now, do you have a problem, Ware?"

Ware nodded vigorously. He had several, in fact. His mother, Jolene, Mrs. Sauer.

"Okay, so here's where the ChipNutz come in." He slid a blue bowl over to Ware. "Take a handful and shake them into your mouth. Crunch for a while, and think about the problem."

Ware shook a handful into his mouth. And just as Jolene had claimed, they did taste like bacon and french fries and peanuts all at the same time. They were the most delicious thing he had ever eaten. He crunched them thoughtfully.

And Walter was right, it did help him clarify his problem.

"People have a lot of expectations about me. My mother expects me to be like her. She hates spending time alone, so she thinks it's bad for me, too," he began. "But I'm not her."

"Hoo, boy. Tell me about it." Walter nodded in a manner that somehow expressed sympathy over all the injustices of the world.

Ware munched another handful of ChipNutz and

was just about to venture into the subject of the vow he'd made to Jolene when she pushed through the swinging doors.

She peered around an armload of cans and nodded toward the exit.

Ware drained his soda, then drew out his wallet.

Walter waved it away. "On the house, pal."

"Thanks, Walter," Ware said in a new, deeper voice, and slipped off the stool.

Ware unscrewed the hose nozzle. For a moment, he and Jolene stared down at the water running into the vast, empty moat.

"Maybe it's not turned all the way on?" he asked hopefully.

Jolene shook her head. "Full force."

He followed Jolene's gaze as she lifted it from the hose to her papayas, and then to the front fencing where the auction notice was. He could read her feelings as if they were printed on his own heart.

"Everything takes too long," she said. "Except the things that don't take long enough."

"Hoo, boy," Ware said. "Tell me about it."



## *forty-seven*

Jolene drew out a knife and sliced a papaya plant off at its base.

Sitting beside the plants, Ware dropped his movie camera and grabbed his ankles.

“Only the females make fruit,” Jolene explained. “You can’t tell which they are until they make flowers. See here? The male flowers spray out, kind of stringy. The females have fatter flowers, close to the base.”

Ware looked over at the rest of the plants, happily growing with no idea that half of them were wasting their time. “So . . . what? The ones that turn out to be boys—I mean males—you kill them all?”

“Almost all. I keep a few around for pollination.” She hacked down another plant. The plant fell over

with a cry of betrayal only Ware seemed to hear.

"It's not their fault they can't make fruit," he tried. "They shouldn't have to die for it. Maybe you could plant them somewhere else."

Jolene shook her head. "You can't transplant a papaya. Their roots don't like to be disturbed. That's why I start them in cans. When I know which ones to keep, I can slide them out—that doesn't cut any roots." She glanced up at her apartment. "Once some people start growing in a place, they don't want to get kicked out."

Ware knew she'd meant to say plants, not people, but right now, he didn't care. "Well, it's not fair."

Jolene put down her knife. She smiled with goofy wonderment and smacked her forehead. "I keep forgetting! We're in Magic Fairness Land!" Then she frowned a clowny sad face and smacked her forehead again. "Oh, no, darn. Still here in the real world."

Ware felt a growl—an actual growl—rumble in his chest. "Why do you even care? So what if I live in Magic Fairness Land?"

Jolene cut off another stalk with a savage slice. "You're not a realist—you want things to be magically what they're not. You have to be a realist to survive in this world."

Ware shifted uncomfortably. “What do you mean, survive?”

“Make it through. Life. Life’s going to crush you if you don’t see it coming.”

Ware looked around. It didn’t help that he was surrounded by flattened playground equipment. This lot hadn’t seen it coming.

“What should I do?”

“Open your eyes. Look out for life, coming to crush you.”

Ware got up and walked down to the moat.

Jolene was probably right. She usually was. She’d been right about the baptistery—he’d looked it up that first night. He’d checked about those rakers and the Black Plague—she’d been right about that, too. And about people breaking into landfills, and about nobody caring if you stole waterweed, and about bar water being free to take.

Jolene was right about everything. So he needed to get reborn, not just as someone whose report cards said, *Ware is outgoing and normal!* and who lived a purpose-driven life and watched over his grandmother, but also as someone who could open his eyes, see life coming to crush him. A realist.

He lifted the hose that was filling the enormous do-over tub. The water, as far as he could tell, was just plain water. According to Jolene, the preacher had said some important words over it to make it holy.

He and Jolene were the closest the lot had to a preacher now. The water actually came from the Grotto, so Walter should have a say, too.

He gave Jolene's words first. "Everything was something else before."

"Hoo, boy," he added for Walter. "Tell me about it."

He thought for a minute about what would be his own contribution. "The outside is part of the inside when it's people," he said at last. Maybe the words weren't important, but they were the truth.





For three days and three nights, the water ran. When Ware arrived at the lot on the fourth morning, he nearly fell off the oak branch, the way he had on the very first day.

Ware turned on the camera. He dropped to the ground and flew across the yard. He turned off the hose, then ran up the drawbridge.

They'd done it. Instead of crane-killing pavement, the church was actually encircled with harmless water. It gleamed like liquid sapphires in the camera lens.

Ware wished there were a seat behind him, because suddenly he really needed to sit down. Then he realized something pretty great: there *was* a seat behind him.

There were rows of seats behind him, in fact. Great

long rows of seats, long enough for a whole flock of people to sit on, ready-made for admiring the wonder of things.

He located the end of a pew and began plowing off shingles and boards and screens and insulation and chunks of concrete. When he'd cleared off a couple of feet, he kept going, because number five in the Knights' Code was: *Thou shalt persevere to the end in any enterprise begun.*

He cleared off the whole thing, and then he went to the janitor's closet and got some rags and cleaner. He polished the wood until it shone.

And then he sat down dead center. On the back of the pew in front of him was a brass plaque, carved with the word *BEHOLD!* It seemed to be an order.

Ware folded his hands together on his lap. He lifted his gaze to where the moat sparkled through the gaps in the wall. And he beheld.



## *forty-nine*

“Behold!” Ware ordered Jolene when she got there. But Jolene had been beholding since she’d run into the lot.

“Wow,” she breathed as she settled herself on the pew beside him. “And it’s not leaking?”

“A few places. I’ll patch it. We’ll keep the hose trickling. Plus it rains every day.”

As if to prove him right, a bank of dark clouds drifted toward them, trailing veils of rain.

This was lucky, because Ware had something to ask, and *Under the Table* Jolene would answer. *Under the Table* she took off her sunglasses and he could see right into her soul.

He got up and led the way. “You said the people went

back to their old ways after they got dunked. Like going to the bar. How did you know that?" he asked when the candles were lit.

Jolene shifted. "I only said one did."

"But how did you know?"

"My window is over the bar's parking lot."

"Okay, but how did you know about the rest? Hitting their kids, you said. Drinking the rent?" Ware looked right into her eyes. He looked into her soul.

And he saw something terrible hiding there. He learned who the one person was. "Your aunt."

Jolene put up her dukes, cartoon fierce. "I'm almost bigger than she is."

Ware found his arms curling, too. As if they were a team. "And drinking the rent?"

"When my papayas are ripe, we'll always have the money."

Ware was struck silent for a moment. He hadn't known Jolene's home was at stake. "You won't lose your garden," he said, hoping he sounded more sure than he felt.

Jolene nodded. "I can't lose my garden." Then she leaned in and squinted right into *his* eyes. She looked as

if she were trying to see into *his* soul. “How come you’re so interested, anyway? Are you trying to get yourself *reborn?*”

Ware turned away. He could use some mirrored sunglasses right now. Or a pair of nictitating membranes.

He kept his gaze on the candles. “Of course not. It’s all stupid anyway. A do-over tub, ha. Saints and angels and all of it.”

“Right. Except for saints.”

Ware laughed. “I thought you were a realist?”

Jolene shrugged. “Saints are real. I see one every day.”

The instant Jolene left for the Greek Market, Ware marched down to the moat. He started to peel off his shirt, but he remembered in time. *The preacher dunks them, clothes and all.*

He waded to the deepest part of the moat. He took a moment and made himself perfectly still.

*Make me a different person*, he wished, as hard as he could. *Make me normal.*

He filled his lungs and fell back as hopefully, as start-overly, as possible. He kept his eyes closed, because it felt wrong to be looking around, enjoying the view, at a

life-changing time like this. Then he got up.

Ware assessed himself. He felt cooler. Less dusty. His mosquito bites didn't itch. But did he feel different *inside*?

No, he did not. He felt exactly the same.

He heaved himself out of the water and climbed the back steps.

And there, dripping pools of water onto the church floor, he realized: He *did* feel different. For the first time ever in the lot, he felt sad.



“**M**y father says he can’t tell a bank what to do. He’s only a city councilman.”

Swing, crash, *BOOM*. Ware actually grunted at the blow as his ruined pledge crumbled to dust, and beside him Jolene staggered a step back.

He straightened up and mustered a protest. “But we covered the pavement with water. Look! Those cranes can’t get hurt now. That was the deal.”

“Um . . . a city councilman?” Ashley repeated. “That’s a person that does *city* stuff, like programs and budgets?”

At that, Ware felt a very small click in his brain. Like a tiny key being inserted into a good idea.

Before he could pursue it, Jolene interrupted his thought. “It’s *who*. Your father is a person *who* does city

stuff. Unless your father is a thing, not a person? Is he a thing?"

Jolene's attack surprised Ware, but it shouldn't have. Sometimes when castle defenders threw down rocks on an attacking enemy, the enemy picked them up and threw them back. He just hadn't ever thought of grammar as a weapon.

"My father is a person," Ashley said, recovering. "But he's not the head of the bank."

Jolene shot her a look like a lance, steely and sharp. "Basically useless." She smashed a mosquito.

Just then a flock of white birds floated down. They began leading a purpose-driven march up the slope to the papayas on long pink legs, pecking the ground with long pink bills.

Jolene flung off her hat, revving up for a charge.

Ashley stepped in front of her. "Hold on. You want those ibises here. They eat bugs."

"Cutworms?" Jolene demanded. "Will they eat cutworms?"

"Are they worms? Then, sure. They eat worms."

"They're caterpillars."

"Um . . . caterpillars? Like popcorn."



Jolene settled back. But Ware could see she was going to keep a sharp eye on those ibises. Those ibises weren't going to get away with anything.

Ashley hurried after the flock. "You birds," Ware heard her comfort them. "This is your place. I'll keep guard."

Jolene turned to him. "Now what? 'I pledge,' you said. 'Ashley will get her father to stop the auction,' you said. Some plan."

Ware swallowed hard. "Well, that was plan A," he agreed. "Plan B might be a little different."

Luckily, Ashley came back down before Jolene could ask what plan B was. She swatted around her head. "Birds would help with these mosquitoes, too. A single purple martin will eat a thousand mosquitoes a day."

"Hope some show up, then." Ware scratched at a bite on his arm. "They've been terrible this week."

"Well, duh . . . standing water?" Ashley swept a hand toward the moat. "You made a mosquito factory here."

Standing water.

Of course. Each week Ware's father tore around the yard, upending every leaf and bottle cap that might hold a drop.

“So if the water moves, the eggs can’t hatch, right?”

Number two on page eleven of his report: *Thou shalt always be prepared to help others in need.*

This was his moment. He was prepared.

He lifted his jaw and thrust out his chest. He stripped off his shirt and leaped boldly into the water.

Chivalry. Not such a crock, after all.