



fifty-one

For the next few days, coming up with plan B occupied much of Ware's time.

It was extremely satisfying work. Most of the scenarios involved chaining himself to the ruined church or lying down in front of Jolene's papayas when the bulldozers came to scrape the lot. He'd face those machines down—ideally, surrounded by a crowd of breathless admirers, including a national television crew—unafraid in the face of the danger.

In all the scenarios, the machines backed off. Jolene's admiration would know no bounds. She'd laugh her soft gurgling laugh. Maybe she'd even hold his hand again.

But there was a problem, he knew. Even if he had the courage to follow through—which was not entirely

certain—his parents surely held strict positions against a kid challenging a bulldozer, especially if that kid was the only one they had. Overprotection: one of the many disadvantages of being an only child.

Since forever, Ware had wished for a sibling.

Didn't matter which, brother or sister. His mother wouldn't have a spare minute to hang over him, she'd be so busy scheduling feedings and nap times and diaper changes, and then, later, playdates and ballet classes and ninja camps.

This brother or sister would be nuts about sports, too, so his father would finally have the kid he wanted sitting next to him on the couch instead of a boy who couldn't remember the difference between innings, sets, and quarters.

Or maybe it would go the other way. Maybe the new kid would be an even worse disappointment than he was. *We should have appreciated Ware more*, his parents would realize. *He's terrific just the way he is.*

The only problem with having a sibling would be his room. His room was the one place on the planet he had some privacy. When he closed the door, every cell in his body sighed in relief. He didn't think he'd survive if he

couldn't have his own room. But still, he wished he had a sibling. Since forever.

Ware shook himself back. He had a plan B to come up with.

Sometimes he felt as if the answer was right there, in front of his eyes. Right at his fingertips. But the only thing in front of his eyes and at his fingertips was a secondhand, nothing-special movie camera.



fifty-two

Birds, with their height advantage, discovered the moat right away. Ware liked imagining the first one doing a cartoon double take in midair—feet braked out, wings wheeling backward—then spreading the word.

The word spread quickly. A giant heron floated in to stalk the wall, a pair of cormorants paddled the circuit, and a flock of what looked like black-and-white scissors skimmed the shallow end, all on the same day.

The next day, a chattering of wild parakeets settled in the three queen palms like bright little limes. After that, they came every morning and stayed for a few minutes, squawking a ruckus over every move he and Jolene made.

Soon after the birds came other animals: rabbits and

frogs, chipmunks and squirrels, dragonflies, beetles, and toads.

A full week after the moat was filled, a comically perfect latecomer crawled into the lot. Ware got down on his belly beside the turtle, his camera pressed to his face. "What took you so long?"

The turtle raised its head in a stately arc, looked straight into the lens, and blinked one eye.

Ware tapped the turtle's shell with a blade of grass. "I dub thee Sir Wink. You are welcome here."

Not all the visitors were. One morning Jolene discovered that the newest contributions to her compost had been swiped. What looked like tiny human handprints led to the moat.

"Raccoons," Ware identified the culprits. "They like to rinse their food."

He lashed together five window screens and settled the cage over the pile, then weighted it with a board. "You can lift it off, but the raccoons can't."

Jolene blew her bangs out and studied him. And for just a second he saw, reflected in those mirror glasses, a kid who was kind of okay.



fifty-three

Ashley started showing up most mornings. She said it was because she liked digging, and maybe that was true. Hand her a shovel and she always looked ready to burst into song.

But Ware noticed that what she was really doing was making the lot into a sanctuary for birds. She scattered the worms they turned up like little presents, and she piled bread crumbs and raisins and sunflower seeds on the moat wall. One day, he saw her sprinkling a trail of something red all around the lot. “Cayenne pepper,” she explained. “Cats hate it? On their paws?”

Ware liked having her around. He liked how clean she always looked. How when a speck of dirt did get on her, it somehow looked intentional, like a piece of jewelry.

Most of all, he liked how she ended her sentences on an up note, making them sound like questions even when they weren't. It made you feel included, as if she wanted your opinion on things.

Jolene, however, picked fights with her whenever she could. It began to bother Ware more and more.

"My great-great-great-great-grandfathers tried to kill each other once," he told Jolene one day.

That got her attention. "Why'd they do that?"

"Well, because of the Civil War. They were on different sides. But they didn't know about me. That they were going to have something in common."

"You think Ashley and I are going to have a kid together someday?"

"Maybe. But no—I mean, maybe you have something in common with her that you don't know about yet."

Jolene sputtered out her bangs at that stupid idea.

"What do you have against her, anyway?"

Jolene peeled off her giant leather work gloves and tossed them to the ground. The move reminded Ware of knights throwing down their gauntlets to issue a challenge to battle.

“She lives in Magic Fairness Land, like you. Whenever she doesn’t like something, her daddy fixes it. Except, unlike you, she actually gets to live there. Because she’s rich.”

Ware thought it over. He picked up the gloves, the sign that he accepted the challenge. “But her father didn’t fix anything. She helps here at the lot herself, and she has other places she’s working on, too. Getting them lit up, for those cranes.”

“Oh, it’s not for those cranes. Why would a rich girl care about birds?”

“Maybe because she cares about birds.”

“Nuh-uh. It’s probably for a school project. Or maybe she’s going to write an essay about how great she is, saving them, so she can look good for college.”

That sounds like an assumption. You shouldn’t make assumptions about people. Ware heard Big Deal’s advice in his head. But he gave Jolene her gloves back, the sign he wouldn’t fight anymore. Jolene knew how the world worked. She was usually right. Still, he hoped she was wrong this time.



“M_{m-hmm . . .}” Uncle Cy leaned in closer to the screen. “M_{m-hmm . . .}”

When he’d arrived after visiting Big Deal, he’d only dumped his bag on the sofa before asking to see Ware’s film. Since then, he’d been scrolling back and forth, reviewing.

While his uncle studied the screen, Ware studied his uncle. Silver-rimmed glasses, a silver stud in his left ear. Black jeans, a black T-shirt made of something silky, not rough like his own.

Ware’s mother made him get new clothes for school every fall. He’d ask for black jeans and T-shirts. She’d never let him get his ear pierced, but he’d try.

Finally, Uncle Cy paused the film and leaned back.

He pointed to the screen. "You keep cutting to those three palm trees."

Ware didn't know if this was a compliment or a criticism. "Well, they're always there," he explained. "Everything else in the lot is always changing."

"But see? They change, too." He scrolled back. "Like here, they're sunny and languid. All's good. Then after we see the auction notice, you cut to them whipping around like they're distraught. How come?"

Ware made a mental note to use words like "languid" and "distraught" more often. "The bank's going to sell the lot. All our work gone."

Ware took a gulp of air. Saying it out loud made it real. Uncle Cy waited patiently while he got himself under control.

"I figure I could build something in the backyard once we own it, but Jolene really needs her garden. I've promised her I'll save it, but I don't know how yet."

"I'm sorry," Uncle Cy said. "But I meant the palms. Why are you doing that with them?"

"That's how I see them," Ware admitted. "It seems like they're reacting to what we do."

Uncle Cy nodded. "A Greek chorus. That's what I thought."

"I know it's dumb, just imagining . . ."

"No, not dumb. A Greek chorus is a device from ancient storytelling. In a play, it's a group of people in the wings who comment on what's going on. They let the audience know what emotion is expected. See? You're a storyteller."

"No, because I didn't mean to do it."

"Exactly. You did it intuitively. I called it. You're a filmmaker."

Ware had to laugh. "That's crazy. Filmmakers are people like you. Not kids like me."

"People like me were all kids like you, once."

Ware tried, but the closest he could get to an image of his uncle as a kid was a smaller version of his grown self. Cool, semifamous, black jeans and an ear stud. "What were you like at my age?"

Uncle rubbed his back against the chair. The move reminded Ware again of a cat, lanky and cool. He scratched his own back on his chair to test out the move.

"So . . . I remember I was always trying to explain myself," Uncle Cy said. "I used to drift off, and then I'd

apologize, as if I'd done something I needed to apologize for. People thought I was lazy, or stupid or stuck-up. I had a really hard time in school."

"That's weird. You're a hero in school now. Last winter our grade watched the documentary you did in the refugee camp with all those little kids following you around. I got to tell everyone you were my uncle."

"Thanks."

"Half the kids were crying. They gave their allowances, they held a fund-raiser afterward. That must feel good."

"Well, it's great when that happens, sure. But it doesn't happen like that very often. You never know who will see your work, and you can't predict how they'll react. Plus that's not why you make it."

"Then why?"

"Because it needs to be made, and you're the one to do it."

Ware lay in his bed that night, staring at the ceiling. Tonight, the plaster swirls didn't look like infinity signs. They looked like question marks. Question marks inside question marks on top of question marks.



fifty-five

Two days later, Uncle Cy left and a tropical storm arrived. It planted itself a hundred miles west in the Gulf, like a toddler throwing a weather tantrum.

"It's supposed to be like this through Wednesday," Ware said at breakfast on Monday when it began. "They won't let us outside at Rec. You know how unhealthy the air is in there. I should stay home." He added a subtle cough.

It was a long-shot argument he hadn't expected to win, but his parents, weakened from two sleep-deprived months, didn't even put up a fight.

"Fine, whatever, could you run the vacuum?" his mother had said as she staggered off to work.

"And maybe a load of laundry," his father added,

scooping up his keys.

And so Ware had three whole days to work on his film. Which, if he had to title it the way it was, would definitely be called *Jolene's Hands*.

Jolene's Hands would have been a pretty good movie. But it wasn't the movie he was meant to make. That was what had come to him as he was drifting off under the question-mark ceiling plaster.

He was meant to make the story of the lot. Because it needed to be made, and he was the one to do it.

But for another reason too.

Uncle Cy had said that it didn't often happen that your film made people do what you wanted. That meant that sometimes it *did* happen. And this, he decided, was one of those times. People would see this film and cry and empty their wallets. He'd bring it to school in September. Other schools, too.

This film would save the lot.

Ware cut most of the footage of Jolene's hands. Most, but not all. Then he went to work.

At the end of those three days, his back ached, his fingers were cramped, and his eyes were red and dry, but he felt better than he had ever felt in his entire life.

And he had managed to trim nearly sixteen hours of footage to four minutes and forty-two seconds.

Those four minutes and forty-two seconds began with the photo of the church being built and ran all the way up to a family of ducks floating in the brimming moat. In between, a wrecking ball smashed down the roof, papayas grew in time-lapse frenzy, and castle walls were muddled. He patched in Jolene's dandelion bed and her compost pile, his sundial and the church floor emerging as he swept off the debris, and a new stained-glass window spilling its rainbow rays.

Even Wink got a close-up—winking, of course.

He stood and stretched wide. He cracked his knuckles and shook his neck loose. He poured a ginger ale, dropped in a slice of orange, and took a long drink. Then he popped an extra-strength honey-lemon cough drop into his mouth.

He was ready for the final layer.

"Everything was something else before," he began to voice-over his film. "And everything will be something else after. Sometimes, if you look hard enough, you can see it—the whole story of a thing."



“So? Plan B?”

Ware shifted away from Jolene on the bus seat. It was Thursday, and he hadn’t seen her since Sunday, and he’d missed her—which had come as a very big surprise to him—so he’d been glad when she decided to come along to see Big Deal. But now he was reconsidering. “Uh-huh,” he agreed. “Plan B.”

“Well, what is it?” Jolene pressed.

“So . . .” Plan B was a little unformed. Plan B had some holes. But the fall was a long way off. “Just trust me. It’s going to work. But I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?”

“Because I say.”

Hearing her own words seemed to take Jolene aback

for a second. Ware changed the subject while he was ahead. "Why are you even coming? I thought that Franklin guy told you what you wanted to know."

"He did. The parts that don't get recycled into other people are 'disposed of in a most respectful manner.'"

"Well, don't you believe him?"

"I believe him." Jolene licked her thumb and rubbed at a scuff mark on the back of the bus seat in front of her. "This used to be a cow," she said, as if that explained anything.

She peered at the seat more closely. "Or maybe some detergent bottles. It's too dirty to tell."

"Jolene. Why are you coming?"

She looked up, wide-eyed. "You said your grandmother *asked* me to," she answered, as if catering to the whims of the elderly were a natural result of her thoughtful personality. "Also, you were gone this week. I got kind of bored."

Ware felt a little buzzy. As if he might be glowing. Jolene had missed him, too.

Just then the bus rocked a hard turn. A can of Chip-Nutz rolled out of the Winn-Dixie bag at Jolene's feet.

Ware caught it and held it up.

Jolene shrugged. "Your grandmother wants bacon. They taste like bacon."

Ware handed her the can. "I didn't tell you she wanted bacon. How did you know?"

"I heard last time."

"You heard her?"

"Oh, everybody heard her," Jolene assured him. "The whole place."

Ware cringed, his hand to his face.

"Let me tell you, if I had a grandmother," Jolene muttered, rubbing the scuff mark again, "I'd want someone with a voice that everyone could hear."

Ware sat back. He hadn't known Jolene didn't have a grandmother. It wasn't fair. He really hated unfairness.

Which reminded him. "That thing you say. About me living in Magic Fairness Land. You're wrong." The insight had come to him the night before. He had lain awake practicing the announcement. "I mean, you're right that I don't think you should just take it when bad things happen. But I don't want things to be magically what they're not. I want them to be what they *could be*. And somebody has to want that, or nothing bad will ever get better."

Jolene blew her bangs out with an unimpressed sputter.

“Besides, you do it too.”

Jolene lifted her shades and arrow-slitted her eyes. “I do not. I’m a realist.”

“Nope. That papaya you got from the Greek Market. Everybody saw a rotten piece of fruit. You saw a plantation.”

Jolene crossed her arms and turned to the window. The whole way to the Bright Horizons Rehabilitation Center, she didn’t turn back once.



fifty-seven

Inside, the same woman sat at the desk eating an egg salad sandwich, wearing the same stained scarf. She squinted up at them from her spider-nest eyes and said the same words—“Isn’t that the nicest thing”—when Ware told her why they were there. She didn’t seem to mean it any more this time around.

Ware signed them in, wondering if he had somehow traveled backward in time.

But just then, something new and surprising happened. A woman in a yellow pantsuit marched out of the elevator and through the lobby. She moved as if she led an extremely purpose-driven life, and that purpose was to get the heck out of the New Horizons Rehabilitation Center.

"You go ahead," Ware told Jolene. "I'll see you up there."

He caught up with the woman at the doors. "Mrs. Sauer. Wait."

Mrs. Sauer turned. She frowned.

Ware drew a deep breath and plunged in. "Why don't you like me? My grandmother said I should ask."

"I don't *not* like you, young man." She crossed her arms over her chest. Because of her thinness, and the yellowness of her pantsuit, it made Ware think of two pencils crossed over a slightly thicker pencil. Somehow, the pencils felt sharpened.

"I think you're mad at me because I wasn't watching her. I should have been. But I didn't know. About her condition. If I'd known, I would have—"

Mrs. Sauer looked disbelieving. "How could you not know about her condition? She's your grandmother."

"Well, I knew. I just didn't know I was supposed to watch her because she's old."

"Because she's *old*?"

Ware nodded. "Her condition. Being old."

"Being *old*? Your grandmother has diabetes, young man."

“Diabetes? *My* grandmother?”

Mrs. Sauer drew herself up and pursed her already pursed lips. She seemed to be asking the question, *How could he not know?* and then answering it herself: *Off in his own world.*

But that wasn't it.

“What a bunch of nonsense! No one *told* you?” she asked with an indignant huff.

Ware shook his head.

“Well, that is just plain *wrong*. It's diabetes, for Pete's sake, not the Black Plague. I've had it for twenty years. Half the people I know have it. You should have been told.”

She crossed her arms over her chest again. This time, though, her thinness and the yellowness of her pantsuit reminded Ware of sunbeams. Sunbeams of justice.

“That simply wasn't fair to you,” she went on. “You are not a child, and you needed to know. I just hate unfairness, don't you?”

And Big Deal was right: it helped a lot not to be alone.



Ware stood at the door and looked in through its window.

Unbelievable. Jolene was perched on the bed beside Big Deal, directly below a sign on the wall that read, "Visitors: Please Do Not Sit on the Bed." Both of them were digging into the ChipNutz can between them as if they hadn't eaten in weeks.

He opened the door.

"Tastes like bacon!" Big Deal crowed, holding up a nugget between freshly fuchsia'd nails. She winked and patted the bed.

Ware came in and sat, as pointedly as he could, on the chair.

"You just missed Rita, Ware." Big Deal licked a

crumb off her lips. "You could have cleared things up with her."

Ware looked down at his lap. "I talked to her," he said carefully.

"Oh, good. And?"

Ware pressed his lips together. He glanced at Jolene and then at the door.

Big Deal patted Jolene's hand. "Do me a favor, would you, dear? Go find Franklin, tell him I could use another blanket."

Jolene hurried off on her mission.

Big Deal turned to Ware. "And?"

He gripped the chair arms so hard his fingers whitened. "And she *was* mad at me. And I don't blame her. You didn't feel great, and I left you alone and went out to the pool. I'm really sorry about that. But why didn't you tell me you had diabetes?"

Big Deal looked down at her nails.

"She's not mad at *me* anymore. She's mad at *you*."

"I expect she would be."

"It's just diabetes, for Pete's sake. It's not the Black Plague."

Big Deal nodded her agreement.

And then he understood. "My mother didn't let you tell me, did she?"

"She didn't want you to worry while you were at Sunset Palms. She felt bad enough about you having to spend the summer there."

"I liked it there! And my mother treats me like a little kid."

Big Deal lifted her hands helplessly. "She's certainly protective."

Ware looked up at the patient monitor, blank and silent now. It was good news that his grandmother didn't need to prove she was alive anymore, but he still felt terrible. "If I had known, I would have done something, Big Deal. I would have protected you."

"I know you would have, Ware. I know. But your mother . . ." Big Deal fell back against her pillow. "Anyway, look. I'm fine and I have two brand-new hips, and I'll be dancing soon. So it doesn't matter."

But it did.



fifty-nine

“**W**hy didn’t you tell me?”

Ware’s mother closed her file folder. She looked up, her face puzzled. “Tell you what?”

Ware stood across the table from her. His stomach hurt. “That Big Deal has diabetes.”

“Oh. That. There are things a child doesn’t need to be bothered with, is all.”

“I’m not a child! And I did need to know that. I was staying with her.”

She opened her folder again. “Well, I don’t see what all the fuss is about, since you’re back home.”

Ware leaned down and pressed a palm over her papers. “I’m home, but Big Deal isn’t. She fell because of

her blood sugar. If you'd told me, I could actually have watched her."

Something terrible struck him. "That's what you wished, wasn't it? That first morning I was home, I came down the stairs and heard you and Dad talking. You said you wished something, but Dad said it wasn't what you wanted. You wished you had told me, didn't you?"

His mother looked away. "Of course not. No. Although, in hindsight . . . But it doesn't matter." She pressed a finger to a single tear in the corner of her eye.

That single tear pierced him—not a hundred-arrow volley, maybe only twenty or thirty arrows, it was hard to calculate when you were bleeding—but Ware had to finish. "It matters to me, because it feels like my fault. And it matters to Big Deal. If you had told me, maybe she'd be at home now. Maybe she wouldn't have needed an operation."

She wiped her eye and smiled a tiny smile. "I highly doubt that. She'd been needing those hip replacements for a while."

"Oh. Well, okay. But I'm eleven and a half. If you keep overprotecting me, I'm not going to survive."

“Excuse me?”

“I’m going to get flattened. If I don’t start living in the real world, life’s going to crush me.”

At that, his mother looked so worried about him that Ware grew worried about her.

The checkout lady at the Greek Market had said that things grow into what’s needed of them. Ware felt that exact thing happening now. He sat down across from his mother. “I’m not a child, Mom,” he said. “You did a good job protecting me, but now I’m strong.”

Suddenly, for the first time in his life, Ware knew exactly where he stood. He didn’t feel as if he might be wafting, or the slightest bit drifty. He sat up straight in his chair. “I am a person leading a purpose-driven life.”

“A purpose-driven life?”

“A purpose-driven life. And the purpose driving it is unfairness.” *Thou shalt do battle against unfairness whenever faced with it—number nine. Thou shalt be always the champion of the Right and the Good, against Injustice—number seven.* “Unfairness. Injustice. I want to fix it. And I got that from you.”

“From me?”

“From you. All day long, you work to fix the worst things that happen, and you love your job.”

“You’re right,” she said after a moment. “Bad stuff happens. I hate that. But I do like fixing it.”

“So stop trying to keep bad stuff from me and start teaching me how to fix it.”

His mother slid forward on her elbows and rested her chin on her fists. She looked him straight in the eye.

“All right. The first thing is to identify the piece of the problem that you can do something about.”

“The piece?”

“You can’t fix everything. But . . .” She patted her folder. “Take this morning. A woman came in, desperate because her husband took off, left her with three kids. Her English isn’t good and all she has is a part-time housekeeper job. It won’t feed three kids. Now, I can’t make her husband come back. I can’t get her a better job. But I walked her out to the crisis center’s food bank, and I signed her up for our night lessons in English. After a while, she’ll be okay.”

“What if you’re just a person, though? What if you don’t run a crisis center?”

“Same thing. You identify the piece of the problem you can do something about. Look around the edges—there’s always something you can do.”

Ware and his mother studied each other across the table for a full minute then, as if they were meeting each other for the first time.

“And Ware,” she said at last. “I’m really sorry.”



sixty

“Just one more thing before you go up,” his mother called from the living room.

Ware paused, one hand on the banister. Since talking with her in the afternoon, he’d been dying to escape into his room so he could think about it all in private.

Ware stepped back into the living room.

“One small thing,” she said. “Your grandmother’s being released in two weeks.”

“Big Deal can go home? Oh, that’s great! Why do you and Dad look so worried?”

“She’s not quite going home yet,” said his father. “First she’ll come here for a while. Until she gets adjusted.”

“That’s really great. I liked living with her. She’s

funny and—" Ware stopped. He looked from one parent to the other. "Here? In this house?"

"Yes, Ware," his mother said. "That's what *here* means."

Ware looked around. "But . . . *where* here?"

His father fumbled with his collar. His mother studied her shoes.

And the answer struck him, like a punch to the windpipe. He gulped some air. "You're giving her my room?"

"No, of course not!" his father said. "Never."

And Ware breathed again. Of course not. His parents wouldn't do that to him. They understood.

"She's just had two hip replacements, for heaven's sake," his mother agreed. "She can't be doing stairs. We're giving her our room."

"Oh, good." Ware felt relieved, but a little guilty now, too. He glanced at the couch. It pulled out into a bed, but it was hard and lumpy. "So . . . where will you sleep?"

His father tugged his collar out farther. "We'll be upstairs," he said. "In your room."

"In my . . ." Ware's windpipe closed again. He felt a kick in his gut, too. "The *sofa*? I'm supposed to sleep *here*? Out in the *open*?"

"No. You'll have a room." His mother walked over to the wall of windows and opened the blinds.

The windows looked out onto the back porch.

"What? No!" Ware cried. "It's a porch. It doesn't have any walls!" This was true if by walls you meant places you could lean against or tape up a poster. Places you couldn't see through. Instead, there were windows all the way around: glass on the living room side, clouded plastic on the other three. "It's not a room if it doesn't have walls!"

His mother folded her arms. "Don't worry, I've got it all planned out. There's plenty of room for your bed and your bureau."

"No walls," he moaned.

"It's not forever, Ware," his mother said more kindly. "We'll hang some curtains."

"Athletes train under difficult conditions," his father added weakly. "It makes them stronger."

"We know it's been a disappointing summer," his mother said. "But don't forget, we owe you something nice when it's over."

On that, his parents fled the living room together, as if they'd set a secret timer.

Ware stood alone, realizing with belated shock that he could have argued for hours and all the arguments would be on his side, but none would have worked. He'd lost his room, and he hadn't even gotten a sibling out of the deal.

He pushed open the porch door to see just how bad his life was about to get. Even at nine at night, the summer light lit up every corner of the little space.

He peered outside. Through the hazy plastic, the backyard seemed to be smoking lazily. The shed was a charcoal smudge.

He looked closer. The shed, which they would own in a couple of weeks, had only a single tiny window.

It was an extremely private space. It had a door. He could put a lock on that door.

His parents had promised him something in exchange for his disappointing summer. Well, now he knew what he wanted.



sixty-one

The next day, Ware lay under the queen palms, filming a pair of hawks flying overhead.

For all of third grade, you couldn't go out to recess without some kid asking you which superpower you'd choose: fly or be invisible.

"Invisible," Ware always chose.

"Oh, right," the kid would reply. "So you could spy on people. Cool." Which had shocked him every time. No, he'd never want to spy on people. He just thought it would be nice sometimes to be left alone.

This reminded him of the no-privacy porch he was about to move into.

He put the camera down and rolled onto his side. Jolene was patting some new dandelions into place.

The walkway was lined with flowers now, gold splashes bright as coins.

“Flight or invisibility?” he called over to her.

Jolene sat back and put down her trowel. This was something he liked about her—she thought about questions for a while before answering. “Flight,” she decided after a minute, then went to back to her transplanting.

Ware got up and sat beside her. “They look like miniature sunflowers.”

Which reminded him of something he’d meant to share with Jolene for a while. Something that would make her laugh, the way she had with Mrs. Stavros.

“That day in the Grotto Bar? You missed it. It was really funny. A woman was sleeping in a booth. Her hair was a perfect circle of yellow, but black in the center. Like a sunflower. That’s what I nicknamed her: Sunflower. Get it?”

Instead of laughing, Jolene grew still again. She laced her fingers across her chest and turned to face the Grotto Bar.

Ware tried again. “Or maybe like a halo. A golden halo that was rotten in the middle.”

Jolene didn’t move.

Ware offered the best detail, his last shot. "I think she was *drunk*."

Jolene got up. She balled up her fists and walked out of the lot.

And Ware felt as if he'd finally gotten his wish—he was invisible. It wasn't so great after all.



sixty-two

Every day after Ashley left, Ware and Jolene jumped into the moat. They swam around where it was deep enough and plowed races where it was shallow. Good luck to any mosquito eggs trying to hatch.

Ware always prepared himself to be reborn when he was in the water, in case a thing like that could surprise you. He never let any hopefulness flicker across his expression, of course.

The water was cool, but the midday, midsummer, mid-Florida sun was too much, even for SPF eighty, hypoallergenic, apply every four hours.

Ware sneaked a sheet out of the laundry basket at home, raided the art closet, and made a banner to string up over the water behind the church.

“What’s that in the center?” Jolene asked.

“Coat of arms. It tells people who you are. Mine’s a movie camera.”

“What’s this?” Jolene pointed to the other thing he’d drawn, tiny and in the corner. The thing he’d hoped she wouldn’t notice.

“Lizard,” he admitted. “That’s who I am, too.”

Jolene came back the next day with her own sheet. On it, she drew an actual coat with actual arms. The arms were wielding a trowel and a rake, which she sparkled up with a whole jar of glitter. “That’s who I am.”

Ware pointed to the smaller drawing in the corner.

“Papaya plant. That’s who I am, too,” she answered.

And Ware saw that she was right. She was feathery and brave at the same time.

Big Deal had said there was a lot he didn’t know about Jolene. She said it was never wrong to ask. When a shower popped up after they’d hung the banners, he decided to try *Under the Table*.

“So . . . how come you live with an aunt?” he asked after the candles were lit.

Jolene’s eyes narrowed. Ware could practically see the

arrow tips pointing out, but he didn't take cover. "I want to know."

Jolene looked down at her knees. She blew out her bangs. "Okay. But it's nothing, get it? When I was five, my mother put me in the car. There were a lot of suitcases, so I thought we were going on a trip. But we just went around the corner to my aunt's apartment. My mother took me up the stairs along with my suitcase. When my aunt opened the door, my mother dropped my hand and they had a big fight. She said, 'I can't go to Nashville with this.' Walter says I looked like I didn't know what was going on."

"Walter says?"

"He heard the fight and came up."

In the soft drumming of the rain, Ware imagined Jolene as a little girl, holding her mother's hand, all ready for a big trip, and then holding air. It reminded him of the hand-taking episode of their first meeting.

He thought of that hand taking a lot.

Mostly, he wondered how the hand holding had felt to her. He wondered if she ever thought of it at all. He wondered if she'd like someone to hold her hand again.

He edged his right hand out until it almost touched

her left. *Extra information. I didn't hate it when you took my hand*, he practiced in his head until it didn't sound pathetic.

“Oh, good,” Jolene said, just as he opened his mouth.
“It's stopped raining.”



sixty-three

Ware sat at the back doorway, his camera trained on his feet. As he swirled them in the moat water, they seemed to grow longer and bonier, then to slither like fish, and then to lose their toes entirely.

He put down the camera. *Open your eyes. Be a realist*, Jolene had said. She always made it sound as if the real world was solid and reliable, the same for everyone. But for him, it seemed more like his feet underwater. The real world could distort itself. Mess around.

Take his report, for example. The hours had flown by when he was working on it. Then, waiting to get it back, they'd crept along. Seeing the A on the cover, he'd thought the classroom walls seemed to glow, and walking home, gravity loosened its grip.

He looked up. Or take clouds. Scientifically, they were formations of water droplets or ice crystals. But wouldn't three different people looking at them see three different things—a dragon; the promise of rain for papayas; a warning not to take someone's hand?

He looked down. Or take . . .

Ware saw something odd. His leg, above his left knee, was swollen. Had he hit his thigh and not noticed it?

He looked at his other thigh. It had the same firm swelling above the knee. He flexed his legs and laughed out loud.

Muscles!

He flexed his arms. Muscles there, too.

He lifted his shirt. His internal flotation device had deflated.

Of course. In the last few weeks, he could carry a cinder block in each hand without panting. His mother looked at him strangely each night and asked if he was eating enough. Maybe the lot hadn't changed him inside yet, but it had changed him outside. And the outside was part of the inside.

It was a start.

Ware lay back onto the hot foundation. Who was he

kidding? It wasn't a start.

These were the best days he could remember. And the happier he grew, the guiltier he felt, because it was his old self having such a good time. In spite of being in the do-over moat every day, his new self hadn't shown up yet.

It was halfway through August. He needed to try harder.

As soon as Jolene took off that afternoon, he jumped into the water. This time, he would do it right.

"Make me a new person," he said, out loud this time. "Make me a normal kid!" he shouted. He remembered how stirring choir practice had sounded and added a "*Hallelujah!*" for good measure. Then he fell backward.

He held himself underwater and counted off a full minute. He stayed down until his chest hurt. He couldn't tell if this was his new self being born or only his lungs burning from not enough air.

He burst up sputtering and felt the eyes on him before he'd opened his own.

Jolene stood staring from the hedge. She held up her garbage bag. "I forgot this."

Ware froze. Had she heard?

Maybe she hadn't heard.

Of course she had heard.

Jolene put down the bag. Her shoulders rose and fell as if she was sighing over a decision she'd made. She walked down to the moat wall, swung her legs over, and dropped in.

Ware could only watch miserably as she waded up right beside him, probably to deliver a scathing lecture up close about how ridiculous he was.

But he was wrong.

"You can't do it by yourself," she said. "You need someone else to do the dunking."

She cupped his neck with one hand and placed the other between his shoulder blades. "Lean back," she said. "I'll dunk you. But don't ask to be normal. You're already better than that."



sixty-four

The bar was empty. Walter looked up from a book and smiled and said, “Hot one out there,” which made Ware’s heart slow down and his stomach unclench.

But Walter looked worried, too. “Where’s Sprout?”

“Sprout? Oh, right. She’s with Mrs. Stavros.”

Walter seemed relieved. “The usual?”

Ware nodded—he had a usual now—and took a stool.

Walter set a fresh ginger ale in front of him. He garnished it with a slice of orange that looked tiny in his giant hand. “So, how you doing, pal?” he asked, just as Ware had hoped he would.

Ware took a deep drink and then a deep breath. “Doin’ okay, Walter, thanks. But I got this problem.”

Walter slid the ChipNutz down the line. Ware shook a handful into his mouth, but only because they were so delicious. He already knew what his problem was. The Knights' Code, number four, demanded: *Thou shalt always speak the truth*. But Ware had not been speaking the truth to his family. Not just about Rec, but about big stuff, like letting them think he was getting normal.

He crunched the ChipNutz thoughtfully. Once again, it helped him clarify his problem.

The clarification was a surprise.

"Walter, I've been lying," he said, "to *myself*."

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

And Ware did. "Do you ever want to start over, Walter? Like . . . be born again?"

Walter rubbed his neck. "Lord, no. Getting here the one time was hard enough."

"Me either. But all summer I've been telling myself I do. That I want to turn into someone else. But that's not what I want at all."

Walter nodded sympathetically as he polished the already polished bar top.

"What I really want is for it to be okay that I'm *not* someone else."

Walter put the cloth down and stared at Ware hard. "Jolene tells me you're her friend. Being a friend seems like a good place to start with being okay with who you are. Are you her friend, Ware?"

Ware nodded. That's what he was now.

"That's good. So am I. She comes in here, I can watch over her. But when she's out there"—he waved toward the door—"I lose her."

Walter still looked very big, but somehow he also looked small, too. The real world, messing around.

"She's okay with Mrs. Stavros. She feeds her."

"I know that. But she's still pretty alone out there."

"Because she doesn't have her parents."

Walter shook his head. "Leaving a little girl on a doorstep like a bag of trash. If I had found that woman . . ."

"You tried?"

"We both did, her aunt and I."

Ware stiffened. "Her aunt helped?"

Walter seemed to read his thoughts. "She was different then. When the church was here. Every Sunday, a fresh start. Tried, anyway. She wasn't always like she is now."

"Everything was something else before," Ware said. "Especially people."

"I guess that's true. Anyway, Jolene has me and Mrs. Stavros. It'd be good if someone else had her back."

Ware sat up so fast his stool swiveled. Here, in this unlikeliest of places, he was being called into service.

He raised his chin, thrust out his chest, and answered boldly. "I've got her back." It was all he could do not to add "My liege lord!" and drop to one knee.

Walter nodded. "You look like someone who means what he says." He leaned forward. "You know, a good watering hole like this brings out people's stories. I've been wondering about you. You got a story, Ware?"

Ware shook his head with regret. "No, I don't have a story."

"Ah, well, you will, pal. Believe me."



sixty-five

Ware put his shovel down to say the very difficult thing. "School starts next Wednesday."

Jolene kicked at some dirt. "For me, too."

Ashley nodded. "Me three."

They stood calculating in silence for a moment.

"Eight days," Ware said.

"Eight days," both girls agreed.

Jolene looked over at the tallest papayas, clustered up with small, hard fruits.

"I have a plan, Jolene," Ware said, hoping his voice didn't shake.

It was a lie, he suddenly saw clearly.

He didn't have a plan. He had five and a half minutes of film and a Magic Fairness Land fantasy. Even if a

thousand kids coughed up their allowances, he wouldn't have enough to buy this place. Ten thousand kids.

"Uh-huh." Jolene got up and left for the Greek Market without looking at him. And Ware was grateful for that. He couldn't bear it if he saw himself reflected right now.

Ashley stayed on that afternoon to pick up any litter that could get stuck in a bird's digestive tract, and when Jolene returned after only an hour at the market, they all trudged to the garden to get digging on the newest trench again. Knowing that the work might be futile made it seem tragic, but noble too.

In the middle of the digging, Ware's alarm went off.

"I just heard a warbler," Ashley said, searching the sky. "That's weird. They don't migrate this early."

"Oh, no. Sorry," Ware said. "That's my alarm. I have to go soon."

Ashley looked disappointed, as if she'd really wanted to see a warbler.

"All this stuff you're doing. I hope it helps you," Ware said generously.

"What are you talking about?"

He glanced over at Jolene, then asked Ashley, "This

is for a school project, right? Or to help you get into college?"

"Um . . . no?"

"Then why?"

Ashley planted her spade, walked into the star-shaped shade of a queen palm, and settled herself down.

Ware followed and dropped into the next star of shade.

Jolene stayed where she was. But Ware noticed she cocked an ear up the slope.

"I used to live in Canada?" Ashley began. "We rode a long way to school on the bus, all these empty roads at dawn. One day, the bus had to stop because there were geese all over the road. Highway crews were shoveling them off. With actual shovels. Their legs were broken. Some of them were struggling to fly away, but you could see their legs hanging down all bent and wrong."

Jolene shot a glare up the rise, as though she suspected Ashley had broken all those goose legs herself.

"We found out afterward. It had rained. In the early-morning light, the wet highway looked like a river to the geese. They tried to land on it, and . . ."

Ashley closed her eyes. "I broke my arm once. Bones

are sharp." She stopped and rubbed her right arm, holding it close to her chest. "There must have been two hundred geese, every one with at least one broken bone. All that hurt. How could you measure it?"

Ware didn't answer. Because how could you?

"I decided it wouldn't happen again. Not on my watch. That's why."

Ware looked down at Jolene. He was tempted to say, *See? You were wrong. She just cares about those cranes.* But he didn't. Because he saw that Jolene had already gotten that news and it had about flattened her.

The spade dropped from her hands. She hung her head and Ware saw her take some slow, shaky breaths. Then she walked over to Ashley's shade star and knelt.

"At the end of the night, Walter empties the ChipNutz bowls," she said. "I was thinking, maybe I could save those leftovers for the birds here. I was thinking."

"Sure," Ashley said. "They might like that."

Jolene blew her bangs up. It looked as if she wanted to say something else but didn't know what it was.

"Come here," Ashley told her. "Give me your face." She reached a hand out toward Jolene's cheek.

Jolene startled back. But then she locked her hands

behind her back, closed her eyes, and leaned in. Ware could tell she was holding her breath.

Ashley began tugging her fingers through Jolene's bangs, weaving the shorter hair into the longer hair behind. "I had to grow mine out last year?" she said. "For a while, they're just always in your way."

She looked over at Ware. "She's at a really hard stage right now."



sixty-six

When the car pulled up on First Street the next morning, all three heads turned at the sound. Silently, they laid their tools on the ground and slipped behind the three palm trunks.

After a minute, they saw a man's shape through the mesh on the fencing. The shape moved toward the bright yellow notice, and then the bright yellow notice disappeared.

In its place, the man put up a new notice. It was an even brighter green.

They waited behind the palms until the car drove off. And then, again without talking, the three of them ran down to the fence and climbed over.

The new notice was the same as the old one, except

instead of "Coming This Fall" it read "September 8."

"The day after Labor Day," Ashley said.

That's not even the fall. It isn't fair, Ware wanted to say. But he knew better. He tried to look unconcerned, like a kid with a solid plan B.

Beside him, Jolene started panting in shallow huffs. Then she ran down First Street and vanished into the backyard of the Greek Market.

On his other side, Ashley said, "Public auction. Anyone can bid."

Ware heard a very small click in his brain, like a tiny key trying to pop the lock of a good idea.

He put up his hand so Ashley wouldn't say anything else right now, scare the good idea away.

And in the quiet, it opened up. "Can you come back here tonight?" he asked when he had examined it. "I want to give you a film to give to your father."

Ashley tore off a corner of the auction notice and wrote her number on it. "Call me when you're ready."

When she rode off, Ware stirred up a pot of gluey stucco and began to slather it onto the front of the building. When he had finished catapulting the stucco onto the tower, he found Jolene's rusty knife, sliced a red

checkered tablecloth into four flags, and strung one up from each corner of the building. "If an empty lot could become a papaya plantation and a castle, it could become anything," he voice-overed as he filmed the transformed castle.

Then he wrapped himself in the full suit of tinfoil armor, clunked himself down on a cinder block, and beheld.

Wink crawled around from the back of the cinder block. Ware fed him a piece of his apple, and as the turtle chewed, he beheld the church, too—languidly, Ware thought—then turned his wrinkled head. The question he seemed to be asking was *Why?*

"Why not?" Ware answered.



sixty-seven

When Ware got to the lot the next morning, he found Jolene stomping over to her compost piles, a ripped-up papaya plant dangling from each fist.

He ran over. "What are you doing?"

Jolene shot her chin at the auction notice. "I told you before. I won't let the bulldozers crush them. I'll do it myself."

"No, don't!"

She pitched the plants onto the pile and faced him. "Why not? You want to do it yourself? You should. This is all your fault anyway."

"How is it my fault?" Although he knew.

"I should never have listened to you. To your 'I'm

going to save your garden,' all hero-like, all Magic Fairness Land."

She headed back for the garden.

Ware ran over to stand between her and her next victims. "Okay, listen. All the film I've been taking? About the lot, and what we did here? Last night I gave a copy to Ashley to show to her father. She's going to convince him that the city should buy it at the auction. For the community center. I left the Rec a copy today, too. They can build a playground here—no unlit pavement, of course. And a community garden, too. So you can still grow stuff here, Jolene. It's going to be great."

Jolene's eyes grew wide and her jaw fell open. For an instant, the scene spun out in Ware's imagination: she was going to throw her arms around him, she'd be so grateful. He wiped his hands so he could hug her back.

But then she shook her head, as if she were waking up. "It's going to be *nothing*! That's the stupidest idea ever. The only thing stupider is that I trusted you."

"Why? Why is it a stupid idea?"

Jolene threw her arms wide. "Because this is real life. And in real life, bad things happen. Somebody's going

to build a strip mall here. Probably have a crappy convenience store, which is actually an *inconvenience* store for people like me who might want real stuff, not beer and cigarettes and lottery tickets. If I even get to keep living here, which I won't because I trusted you and didn't get a job, I'm going to have to be all over the trash situation. The customers will pitch their cigarette butts and no-luck lottery tickets in the parking lot, and every night the clerks will throw out the old, wrinkled hot dogs for the rats to fight over. *That's* how the real world works!"

Ware slumped against a queen palm trunk.

He looked down at the papaya plants, feathery and brave at the same time, and over at the shimmering moat, the rocky castle. All their work, and pretty soon it wouldn't exist. "What are we going to do?"

Jolene spun to him, hands on her hips, up in his face. "What are *we* going to do? Well, *you* are all set. You always have been. You never needed this place."

She wasn't wearing her sunglasses, but if she had been, Ware knew what he would have seen reflected: a kid who *had* needed this place. All summer, he'd dug rock dust, lugged cinder blocks, built walls, stolen plants, because

he'd needed the lot as much as the lot had needed him.

"You never cared."

Ware was shocked. "I *cared*. Inside. In quiet. That's how I am."

Jolene turned around to her plants. She pressed her lips together and headed toward them again.

Ware touched her shoulder. "No. Don't. Just wait and see what happens. It's going to work."

She turned, tears welling in her eyes. And Ware had to thrust his fists into his pockets, the urge to wipe them away was so strong. Had to jam them in, had to punch them in, fists so tight his nails bit into his palms, because otherwise he would have brushed those tears off her cheeks, which Jolene would never have allowed.

She swiped at her cheeks. Her dirty hands smeared a muddy raccoon mask that looked ridiculous and beautiful at the same time, and Ware forced his hands to stay in his pockets, because now he wanted to hold her. What was *wrong* with him?

"Nothing," she spat. "Nothing. Good. Ever. That's the way the real world is. You get that now?"

"It might work," Ware whispered miserably.

She walked out of the lot, head up, shoulders quaking.

Thunk-thunk-thunk.

Ware fetched the bag of plastic letters. **I AM SORRY**,
he spelled on the sandwich board sign, both sides.

It didn't begin to cover it.



sixty-eight

That night, Ware's parents wandered from room to room, making a big deal of pinching themselves in disbelief.

"The stairs? We own these beautiful stairs?" one would gasp.

"We own these beautiful stairs!" the other would shout giddily.

"This window, this doorknob, this floor?"

"This window, this doorknob, this floor!"

"We signed the papers this afternoon," Ware's dad explained with a proud grin.

And happiness was like sunshine: It shone on everyone nearby. Ware smiled with his parents, and he meant

it. But he had his own weather system going on inside. Dark clouds, cold wind. *Nothing. Good. Ever! That's the way the real world works.*

Yes, he got that now.

In the restaurant, his parents ordered champagne.

Ware picked up the candle in the center of the table and stared into the flame. He would never light the candles *Under the Table* again. Whatever happened with Ashley's father and the auction, his part was over. He would miss every inch of the lot, and every inch of the castle. He would miss the papayas. He would miss the moat. He would miss Wink.

He would miss Jolene.

"Ware." His father touched his arm. "The waiter asked what you'd like to drink."

Ware sighed. "Oh. The usual. Ginger ale, please. With a slice of orange."

He was going to miss Walter and the Grotto Bar.

He dropped his chin to his fists. Above him, his parents clinked their water glasses and grew even sunnier.

"Here's to Labor Day. Working only one shift again

will feel like a vacation,” his father said. He turned to Ware. “Maybe school will feel like a vacation to you, huh? After this summer?”

School. He couldn't even imagine a time when he didn't go to the lot. He dropped his head to the table.

All he wanted was for summer not to end.



sixty-nine

Jolene showed up. Ware had worried she wouldn't, but she showed up.

She watered her cans and picked off dead leaves and forked over the compost, but Ware could see that she was only going through the motions. The queen palms shuddered above the row she'd stripped of plants the day before.

Ware patched the moat wall with as much bravado as he could muster, trying to send her the message: He wasn't giving up and neither should she. The city might buy the lot. The city *would* buy the lot. Jolene didn't look like she was receiving the message.

He kept checking the sky for signs of rain. They could talk about it *Under the Table*. The sky grew bluer and brighter every minute.

Finally, he lifted his chin, thrust out his chest, and advanced boldly up the hill. "Are you distraught?" he asked.

Just then, he heard the squeal of bike tires.

Ashley tossed her bike and scaled the fencing. For a moment Ware's hopes rose. But the news he read on her face as she walked toward them crushed them.

"The city isn't going to buy this place?" he asked, but it wasn't really a question.

"There won't even be an auction. It's already been sold. We never had a chance."

"Already sold?" Ware repeated. "That's not . . ." He bit off the word. The last thing he needed was a lecture on Magic Fairness Land.

Ashley hung her head. "Some developers snuck in and cut a deal."

"That's how it works," Jolene said bitterly. "It's going to be a strip mall, isn't it?"

Ashley looked surprised. "Yeah. It's already got tenants signed up."

"Let me guess: a convenience store, right?" Jolene shot Ware a dark look.

"Wow, yeah," Ashley agreed. "And a dry cleaner. And a nail salon, too, I think."

“Perfect.” Jolene threw her hands up. “Rat fights, cigarette butts, dry cleaning chemicals to poison us, and who knows what they do with those toenails. Just perfect.” She stomped out of the lot, still muttering.

Ware and Ashley watched her climb to her apartment. The stairway shook with each of her steps. Even after she’d slammed the door and Ashley had left, Ware stood rooted, watching where Jolene had disappeared.

A movement in the back window caught his eye. He recognized Jolene’s hands even from this distance. They taped a grocery bag over the glass.

Ware climbed the tower and looked down into the pale mirror of the moat. No matter how he turned, he saw himself reflected in the honest water: a kid who had tried to be a hero and failed.

He tore his eyes from the moat and surveyed his kingdom for the last time. Everywhere he looked, he saw unfairness.

And then he looked around the edges.



seventy

When Ware got home, he found his parents bent over the kitchen table, admiring the new deed. “I know what I want,” he told them.

His mother looked up. “Hmm?”

“To make up for the summer.”

“Oh, good.” His dad pulled out his wallet. “Ask away.”

“The yard.”

“What yard?”

Ware pointed out the back door. “The backyard. And the shed. I want it to be mine.”

His father started to laugh, but his mother put a hand on his shoulder and shook her head. “Cyrus told me you might ask for the yard. Of course it’s yours. I have a

feeling you'll turn it into something amazing."

Ware went outside and stood on the back step. The yard looked exactly the same as it had all summer—a wasteland. But it looked entirely different, too—trembling with hopeful excitement. The real world, messing around again.

Then he went back inside. He picked up the phone and dialed. "Do you miss digging?" he asked when Ashley answered.

"That's so weird," she said. "I kind of do?"



seventy-one

Ware stood on the community center doorstep. He could bear it for this one last day. Then he'd retrieve his father's first aid kit and go say goodbye to the lot.

Saying goodbye to the lot would be even harder, but he could do that, too, because after that, he'd get to tell Jolene what he'd done.

He lifted his chin, thrust out his chest, and opened the door boldly.

But inside, fifty kids were running around and shouting, and his soul shrank down behind his heart. Maybe he'd go float in the moat all day. Maybe he'd lie under the queen palms and watch clouds.

He slipped over to the cubbies, pulled the first aid kit from the back, and hurried toward the door.

Ms. Sanchez caught him before he could escape. "I was hoping I'd see you," she said. "Ware, right?"

"Uh . . . we . . . it turned out I didn't need to . . ."

Ms. Sanchez waved a hand. "It happens. But I wanted to tell you that I saw that film you made. Very impressive."

"Oh. Thanks. It didn't work, though. The community center isn't going to get the lot."

She shrugged. "No, and that's a shame. But I was thinking something else."

Suddenly, she didn't look quite so tired. "We have a big screen we use for movie nights, once a month. What a waste, I was thinking. Here we have a young man who knows his way around a camera. How would you feel about starting a film club?"

"Me? But, I'm not a professional or anything."

"Do you know what the word amateur means, Ware?"

Ware shook his head.

"It means 'someone who loves something.' I think that's what we need here. I could round up a couple of used movie cameras. You and any interested kids could teach each other."

Ware's soul uncurled a little bit. "You'd really let me do that? Because I could do that." Just then, a Wiffle ball bashed his shoulder.

He picked it up and looked across the room.

He saw, just like he had his first day, a huge space filled with kids. Some in big groups, some in small ones, a few alone. The outside was part of the inside when it was people.

He had no idea who might want to join a film club. But he knew where he wanted to start.

"Hey, Ben!" he called to the tall-necked boy, who was painting at an easel, then tossed the ball.

Ben caught it and trotted over.

"Do you like movies?" Ware asked.



seventy-two

“One hundred fourteen plants! Who would do that? Someone terrible, that’s who. Probably that bank guy, with the suit. And the compost! That’s the worst! All that work, me and the worms!”

Ware wished he had his camera. For five minutes Jolene had been ranting at full throttle, and he would have filmed every second. Even now, winding down, the sheer power and the glory of her indignation made you want to stand up and cheer.

But of course, she didn’t know.

“Jolene, that’s not—”

“No, the worst is Mrs. Stavros’s shopping cart! She trusted me and now I have to tell her I let it get stolen.”

Ware shot his palms out, policeman style. "Stop. Listen!"

"Nope! Don't even start with some stupid story from Magic Fairness Land. Because here in the real world, bad stuff happens. People steal shopping carts and compost and little plants."

Ware saw Jolene was intent on seething for a while longer. And somehow, he didn't want to tell her what he'd done anymore. He wanted her to see it.

"Fine, no story," he said. "Follow me."

"Where?"

"Follow me."

"Why?"

"Because I say so. One time, *you follow me.*"

Jolene refused to walk with him, and he heard her stewing darkly behind him the entire hour it took to get there. When they finally reached his driveway, he wasn't so sure he'd done the right thing.

Jolene drew up. "You live here?"

"Yes. But that's not what—"

"The whole house? You own it?"

"Well, since last week. But—"

"And you can never get kicked out? You're so lucky."

Ware turned to his house. He saw it as if for the first time. A whole house. From the wide front step he used to jump off for hours when he was five to his room tucked under the eaves where the skylight above his bed perfectly framed the Big Dipper each January, which he would have to give up next week but would get back in a couple of months. And everything in between.

“You’re right,” he said. “I am. But—”

“Great. Well, thanks for showing me how lucky you are. Now I’m going to walk back and tell Mrs. Stavros that I lost her shopping cart.” She spun toward the sidewalk.

Ware almost lunged for Jolene’s hand to pull her back, but he caught himself at the last second. “I took it,” he said instead, shoving his hands into his pockets. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you. The shopping cart. It’s here.”

“Right, sure.” Jolene scowled, but she followed him to the backyard.

For a good ten seconds, she stood frozen, like a stop-motion frame. And then she fell on her knees in front of the ChipNutz cans and brushed her fingertips over the papaya plants, looking as if she wanted to hug each one. “They’re all here? All hundred fourteen?”

“All hundred fourteen.”

She ran to the compost piles, turned to him.

“Ashley helped. And your tools are in the shed.”

“All this . . . ?”

Ware joined her. “It’s yours. You’ll have to start over, but I’ll help.”

“It’s mine?”

“My parents gave it to me, and I’m giving it to you.”

She pointed to the sandwich board. “‘The Real World,’” she read out loud, her eyebrows lifted into questions.

“Because you’re right. Bad stuff happens. But the real world is also all the things we do about the bad stuff. We’re the real world, too.”

Jolene took off her sunglasses. And in her eyes, Ware saw himself reflected. A kid who was maybe a little bit of an actual hero.



seventy-three

When Ware heard the car drive in at five, he raised a thumb to Jolene. He had prepared for everything.

A few seconds later, his mother stepped out the back door. “No more second shifts!” she said with a dramatic hand thrown over her forehead. She looked around. “What’s all this?”

“You gave me the backyard,” Ware reminded her.

“Of course. But I wasn’t expecting . . .”

“Papayas!” Ware launched into his speech. “Jolene says we can have as many as we want.”

His mother seemed to notice Jolene for the first time. A smile blossomed on her face. “Jolene?”

“My friend from this summer. Now, papayas are good for breakfast, lunch, or dinner.”

His mother's smile grew broader. "Your *friend*. How nice. From the Rec."

Too late, Ware saw that actually, he had *not* prepared for everything. He had omitted a crucial detail. He tried to signal Jolene, but she had already dropped her shovel and was brushing off her hands.

"No, ma'am," she said, all sweet politeness. "I met Ware at the lot."

"Papayas," Ware tried, "are excellent in smoothies!"

"At the lot?" his mother asked, ignoring the diversion.

Jolene nodded. "Right. After he quit Rec."

Ware stepped between them. "They're loaded with vitamins. *Vitamins*, Mom!"

His mother leaned around him. "After he . . . excuse me? *Quit Rec?*"

"Yes. You know," Jolene said, sounding a little nervous now. "When we built the moat? You know. Ma'am."

"The moat? I know . . . ?" Ware's mother pinched the bridge of her nose. She raised her other hand, as if asking the world to slow down. "You come inside, Ware. We're going to have a conversation." Then she disappeared, shaking her head.

Ware and Jolene darted to the picnic table. The cross-bars cramped the space. Still, *Under the Table* was the right place for a huddle.

“You said they didn’t care,” Jolene hissed. “You said they were happy you weren’t alone and had stuff to do. You said they didn’t care.”

“I meant they *wouldn’t* care. If they knew, they wouldn’t care.”

“Well, extra information: your mother cares.”



seventy-four

“I think you should tell me about your summer.” Ware’s mother drummed the table. Her voice was oddly calm, but dangerously high-pitched. “Apparently I missed something.”

“Okay, sure,” Ware said. “My summer. Well . . .” He pulled the Rec brochure from the refrigerator door and consulted its offerings. “I had many Diverse Enrichment Opportunities and built my Real-Life Skills. I made a stained-glass window. I learned how to grow things and built a moat. You should see all the birds that came. I stopped going to Rec. My summer was great!”

“Excuse me?”

“I said my summer was great.”

"Not that part." His mother leaned in and cupped her ear. "About you not going to Rec."

"Well, right, I had all those valuable experiences *instead* of Rec. And my summer *was* great. I made a film with Uncle Cy's camera. And the film went—"

"Not once? Every day all summer I dropped you off, and you . . . you never went inside?"

"Of course I went inside. A few times. In the beginning. And I brought the film to the Rec. That's what I'm trying to tell—"

"Over five hundred dollars, and you skipped?"

"I offered to pay you. Twice as much, remember? You would have *made* money!"

She couldn't argue that point, but Ware could see she was regrouping for a side-flank assault. He seized the advantage. "I had Meaningful Social Interactions every day, just like you wanted. With other kids, with Walter, with—"

"Who is Walter?"

"So . . ." He shouldn't have mentioned Walter. "You'd like him. He listens to people and helps them solve their problems." He edged the Rec brochure across the table.

"And now Ms. Sanchez wants me to—"

"I don't think I know a social worker named Walter. Where did you say he practices?"

Why had he mentioned Walter? "Uh . . . near the community center. And here's the best part: I'm going back to Rec. Ms. Sanchez invited me. And this time you don't have to pay!"

That threw her off the Walter track, at least. "No? How's that?"

Ware explained about the film club. When he finished, he dropped his shoulders and spread his arms wide. "That's all I've got, Mom. I'm trying to be normal, but this is as close as I get."

"What do you mean, trying to be normal?"

"I know you wish you had a normal kid." He felt a dangerous prick behind his eyes. "I heard you."

"I would never say something like that."

"The first day of Rec. You told Dad that I tried to buy my way out of it. You called me antisocial."

"What? No. You misheard."

"I didn't mishear. You asked Dad, 'Why can't we have a normal kid?'"

"I said that?" Her eyes filled. "I was so stressed then. With your grandmother, with the extra shifts. It's not an excuse—I should never have said that. I didn't mean it, and I'm so sorry you heard it." She wiped the tears from her eyes and leaned back. "All the time, I was protecting you so you wouldn't get hurt—I know, I know, *overprotecting* you!—and it turns out I'm the one who . . ." She got up and wrapped her arms around him. For a moment, relief flooded through him.

"I've only ever wanted you to be happy."

He pulled away. "But I'm not you, Mom. Sometimes I'm happy doing stuff by myself. Uncle Cy says he's that way, too. He says being like that is normal. For an artist."

"Cyrus was trying to tell me that. I think I was trying not to listen." She picked up the Rec brochure, tore it in half, and threw the pieces in the trash.

Just then, Ware's dad's walked in the front door. Ware held his head in his hands as he listened to his mother tell him what she'd just learned.

"Let me get this right, son," his dad said when he'd heard the whole thing. "You asked for the backyard, just to give it away?"

Ware looked up. His dad wore the baffled, cotton-ball expression again. He hung his head and nodded.

“Your big reward for the summer, which your mother said seemed really important to you. You just gave it away?”

Ware’s head sank to his chest. He spread his hands in apology. “Jolene needed it more.”

His dad wrapped an arm around Ware’s shoulder and squeezed. “You’re a real team player,” he said. “I am so proud of you.”

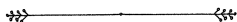
His mother rose. “I think you ought to show us this film that got so much attention.”

Ware sat between his parents and opened the film. While it ran—six minutes and three seconds—he watched their eyes. For six minutes and three seconds they never left the screen.

At the end, his mom sat quietly for a minute. “I think Cyrus is right.”

Ware felt himself swell. “You think I’m an artist?”

“That, of course,” she said. “But I meant he’s right that it makes us lucky.”



Late that night, after they'd gone for pizza and shopped for a thousand things for school, which did include black jeans and a black T-shirt but did not include ear piercing, Ware lay in bed looking up at the ceiling plaster whorls. Tonight they looked like smiles on top of smiles inside smiles.



seventy-five

Jolene took the three-forty-five bus to Ware's house every day after school, bringing along a garbage bag full of old fruit and vegetables from the Greek Market, and took the five-ten bus home.

One day, she stayed a little later than usual. They were inside drinking lemonade when Ware's mother came in from the living room.

"I notice there's a pile of garbage out back" was the first thing she said.

Ware hurried to intercede. "We'll move it behind the shed. Or cover it."

His mother gave him a puzzled look, then smiled at Jolene. "We'll start saving our scraps for your compost. I'll leave them in a can by the back door."

“Your *scraps*? You’ll give me your *scraps*?” Jolene asked, the way a normal person might ask, “Your *gold*? You’ll give me your *gold*?” Then she had to say, “Thank you, ma’am” about a dozen times, until finally Ware went to the door and nodded meaningfully to the waiting garden.

But his mother wasn’t finished. “You know, people drop produce off at the food pantry. Sometimes it’s past its prime, and we have to throw it out. I’ll bring it home from now on, add it to the pile.”

Jolene about fell on her knees thanking her for that.

“We should get back outside,” Ware tried.

But his mother held up a finger. She opened the drawer under the desk and drew out the fresh red school-year planner she’d bought for Ware. Each morning, she’d left it by his backpack, and each morning he’d put it back in the drawer.

He groaned. “Mom, she doesn’t want—”

His mother waved him off. She flipped open the planner in front of Jolene. “There’s a calendar up front. We can mark planting dates, harvest dates—things like that. There’s a section for notes and see, here in the back, there’s a spreadsheet. We’ll keep track of what you get

per pound, profit and expenses.”

Ware tried to catch Jolene’s eye, to mime to her that she could just ditch the planner. But Jolene lifted it as reverently as if it were sewn together of butterfly wings. “We?” she asked. “You’ll *help* me? And I can *keep* this?”

And Ware realized: He had just gotten his sibling wish. Half of it, anyway.

Just then, Ware’s father stuck his head in from the living room, smiling in pride. “Garbage, a planner, and some help,” he confirmed what his miracle of a wife had organized. “A hat trick.”

Jolene spun to him, clutching the planner to her chest. “You know *hockey*?” she asked, breathless with hope.

Ware’s dad clapped his hands together and rubbed them. “The season opener is in three weeks. Save you a spot on the couch?”



seventy-six

Jolene didn't change the message on the sandwich board, even after Ware showed her the bag of letters in the shed. He'd also told her she could get rid of the picnic table, make room for more plants, but she'd kept that, too. Crouched *Under the Table*, knees touching, they said whatever had to be said.

"Walter got the bill," Jolene said the first time. "Apparently water's not free."

"So . . . do we have to pay him back?"

Jolene laughed, a thing she did so often now Ware was getting used to the sound. "He says I have to flatten boxes for him for the rest of my life. He says you have to help, too."

It took Ware another week to get up the courage to

ask what had to be asked. "Did they clear the lot?" He wrapped his arms, bracing himself.

"Nope. They worked in the front for a couple of days, but then the police came and made them stop."

Ware straightened so fast he hit his head. "The police? How come?"

"Wink."

"Sir Wink? The turtle?"

"Nuh-uh. Tortoise. Apparently, Wink is a gopher tortoise."

"Well, so?"

"So Ashley showed your film to her Audubon group. One of the bird ladies jumped off the couch when she saw Wink and shouted, 'Whoa, whoa, hold it right there, that's a gopher tortoise!' The good thing about them is they're on the threatened and endangered species list."

"How is that good?"

"Well, it's not good for Wink, obviously. But it meant they had to stop clearing the lot until they could get a wildlife expert to come out. The bulldozer guy was not happy."

"Wow. So . . . maybe the lot could be a refuge. Maybe the community center could still have some of

it.” He would rename his film *Saved by a Tortoise*. They could—

“Nope. Still here in the real world, remember? It took a while to get someone there—these wildlife experts, pretty busy, I guess. Anyway, they’re going to ‘relocate’ Wink next week. Then they’ll have to find his burrow and protect that, since hundreds of other species camp out in gopher tortoise burrows, too. That will take a while. It didn’t save the lot, though. Eventually, they’ll clear it. But still.”

But still. Uncle Cy had been right. You never knew who would see your film, or what would happen when they did.

“I heard about the lady recognizing Wink,” Ware said when Ashley answered her phone. “Any other things they mentioned about my film?”

“They liked the bird parts best, of course,” Ashley said. “They loved the parakeets in the palms.”

“But about my filming? More about that?”

“No, sorry. Except Mrs. Watson said, ‘That boy sure likes that girl’s hands’ about a dozen times. They all laughed about that.”

“Okay, never mind. Tell me about the lady who recognized Wink. All the details.”

“Well, um . . . she’s pretty old? I never saw her move like that before. She jumped right off the couch. We were all kind of worried about her.”

“I mean, tell me what she said about me.”

“Oh. She couldn’t believe you were only eleven.”

“I’m eleven and a half. No, wait. Eleven and three-quarters.”

“She kept saying, ‘He’s only eleven? That young man is going somewhere!’”

“Eleven and three-quarters. Did she say where? Where I was going?” Over the phone, Ware imagined Ashley recalling a list of exotic places: Morocco, Hong Kong, Calcutta. Somehow the twirling sounded as if she was recalling a long list of exotic places. Morocco, Hong Kong, Calcutta. Because kids like him turned into grown-up filmmakers like his uncle.

“No,” she said. “Just ‘somewhere.’ ‘That young man is going somewhere. And he’s only eleven,’ she kept saying.”

Ware sighed. “And three-quarters.”

Then he gave Ashley his number. “Call me if you

remember anything else the Audubon ladies said. You can call me anytime.”

“Um . . . I think I remembered everything already?”

“Just in case,” he said. “Anytime.”



seventy-seven

Two months later, on a Sunday afternoon when his whole family had gathered for Big Deal's birthday, Ashley did call. "The cranes are on their way." She was so excited she didn't even turn it into a question. "Let's watch from the lot."

Um . . . YES?!

He ran to the living room. "Come to the lot at seven. I have a surprise," he told everyone.

"I'll bring my camera," his uncle said.

Big Deal winked. "Will the little skulker be there?"

Unbelievable. His own grandmother.

"I'm going to get her now," he called, and then he took off on his bike. He pulled up in front of the Grotto Bar, panting. He could really use the usual—maybe a

double—but he headed straight up the stairs to Jolene's apartment and banged on the door.

Catching his breath on the landing, he looked down over the lot. The moat was only half full now, and suspiciously green, but it glinted in a contented manner.

On Friday, Jolene had told him the wildlife people had finished protecting Wink's burrow. The bulldozers were coming back Monday to finish.

Monday, *tomorrow*. Tomorrow they'd smash the walls, spill the water, scrape the land to bone.

The thought made his chest hurt. He was grateful when he heard steps shuffling to the door.

The woman who opened it had the yellowest hair he'd ever seen. It sprang out of her head like a crown. The center was black.

A bunch of answers fell into place, none of them good. He remembered the worried look on Walter's face as he scanned the booths, and how he'd sent Jolene away. The things Jolene had said about her aunt. He remembered how her face had hardened when he'd joked about Sunflower's name, and about how maybe she'd been drunk.

Ware felt his face redden. How mean he must have

sounded. How much wanton offense he had given.

Jolene came sliding into the hall. She dashed past Ware onto the landing into the neon light flashing from the endlessly thirsty flamingo.

“I’m sorry,” Ware whispered.

“I know.” She sighed. “Me too.”



seventy-eight

“**T**hey looked like saints coming up the drawbridge,”
Ware voice-overed as he filmed.

It wasn’t his imagination, either—the visitors all did look like saints. First, because a camera lens reveals how special people are, even people who appear ordinary. Also, because the streetlight above made halos around their heads. Ware had scooped a case of light sticks from his father’s truck, so the drawbridge glowed like a runway, lighting people mysteriously from below, too.

Ashley arrived first with her father and eight Audubon ladies. Ware filmed her helping the oldest one settle onto the pew as gently as if the woman were a fragile bird she was tucking into a nest. He put down the camera and went over and introduced himself. “I’m almost

twelve," he told the couch jumper. "Practically twelve."

Next up came his family. His parents guided Big Deal by the elbows, although she kept batting their hands away. Uncle Cy followed, arms outspread to catch her if she fell. Besides the streetlight halos and the light sticks, they all seemed to be glowing from inside, too.

Ware's mother paused in front of the Audubon ladies as she squeezed by them on the pew. "Did you see the film? My son made that film. My son, Ware. I'm his mother," she said to each.

The first time Ware heard it, he about fell into the moat. After he heard it the second time, he trained his camera on her, to preserve the extraordinary event in case she said it again. But when she did say it a third time, he put the camera down. Because it turned out he didn't want anything between them when his mother's face lit up with pride.

When she sat down beside Big Deal, he picked up the camera again and panned it over to Jolene. She had gone to say a final goodbye to her garden and found a ripe fruit. She twisted it off and bundled it in her sweat-shirt like a baby. As she carried it up the drawbridge, he saw how special she was, too. How there wasn't another person like her.

He stopped her as she passed him. "Do you want to get your aunt?"

Jolene shook her head and pointed to the back driveway. "Here comes my person." She laid the papaya baby on the rim of the baptistery and ran down to take a jug of juice from Mrs. Stavros and help her up the drawbridge.

Ware fetched a stack of communion cups and doled them out. He lit candles for the holders on the pew and then filmed Mrs. Stavros passing her jug down the row, and the people filling the tiny cups as they introduced themselves. His stained-glass window reflected the candles in little jewel-y flickers.

Ware hung his camera around his neck and joined Jolene at the other end of the pew. "How come you never let me go to the Greek Market with you?"

Jolene raised her eyes to the side fence. "She's going to leave it to me when she goes back to Greece."

"Well, that's great. But why couldn't I go with you?"

Jolene looked over at Mrs. Stavros, refilling Uncle Cy's cup. She hung her head. "Because she's my saint. I was afraid I might lose her."

"You could lose her if I went over there?"

"I'm her favorite person in the whole world. Nobody

else likes me best. I was afraid if she met you, she might like you better."

Ware sat a moment, searching for the words to tell her he would never have let that happen. Before he could find them, Ashley's phone buzzed.

She looked down at it and then held up a hand. "They just flew over Tuscawilla Lake," she announced. "They're ten minutes away."

Just then, Walter came hustling across the lot clutching a flashlight and a can of ChipNutz. Ware turned the camera on. Through the lens, he looked like a saint, too, but then Walter looked like a saint all the time.

Walter gave Jolene a kiss on the head and patted Ware's shoulder. "You've got yourself a story now, pal," he said.

Ashley held up her hand again. "Two minutes."

The crowd grew still.

Ware folded his hands on his lap and looked up. The rising moon was almost full behind the clouds, the sky deep violet. He remembered a twilight like this at the beginning of the summer, when he had lain at the bottom of a pool, watching a bird carve the sky, wishing for someone to share the sight.

They heard the cranes first, trumpeting their prehistoric cries.

Ware lifted the camera to the north sky, and then there they were—a hundred, two hundred, a thousand and more. Wave after wave, printing the sky like live hieroglyphs. The air thumped with the beat of their wings and the three queen palms fluttered skyward, raising their fronds in praise.

Ware stood. He slipped out of the pew and over to the back of the foundation, still filming. He panned the camera down over the moat, and as he did, the moon emerged and the water flashed silver, reflecting the flight of the birds.

And himself.

Ware felt as if he had climbed the world's tallest watchtower, because suddenly he could see the whole picture.

He saw that Walter was right—he had himself a story now. But it wasn't just his story; it was the story of the cranes and the story of the lot and it was Jolene's story, too, and Ashley's, and the story of everyone gathered here tonight, because all their stories were one.

Suddenly Jolene was beside him. Without thinking,

Ware let his free hand reach out and find hers. He held his breath.

Jolene curled her fingers around his and squeezed. And then she said exactly what he was thinking. “*Now this place is holy.*”

Ware squeezed back. He trained the camera on the last of the cranes. He knew how those birds felt, those birds beating their way home just as they had for millions of years, to a place that always let them land softly. Ware knew exactly how they felt, because at that moment, he had wings.

“You see that?” he asked. Not in his head, not in a whisper, but in a voice that everyone heard. “Wow.”