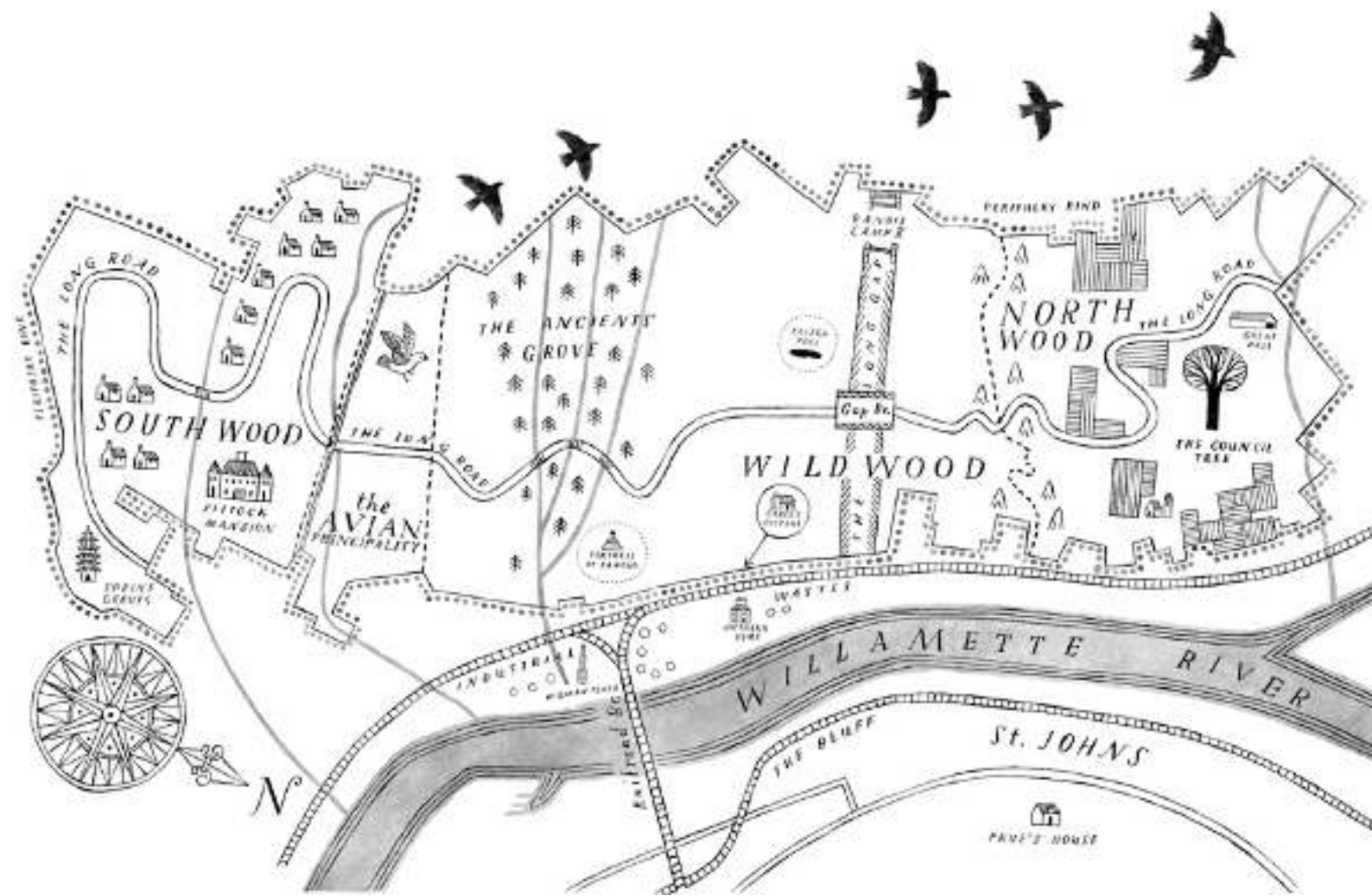




UNDER WILDWOOD

written by
COLIN MELOY
with illustrations by
CARSON ELLIS

The sequel to the *New York Times* bestseller *Wildwood*





UNDER
WILDWOOD

THE WILDWOOD CHRONICLES, BOOK 11

COLIN MELOY

Illustrations by

CARSON ELLIS

BALZER + BRAY

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DEDICATION

For Steve Malk

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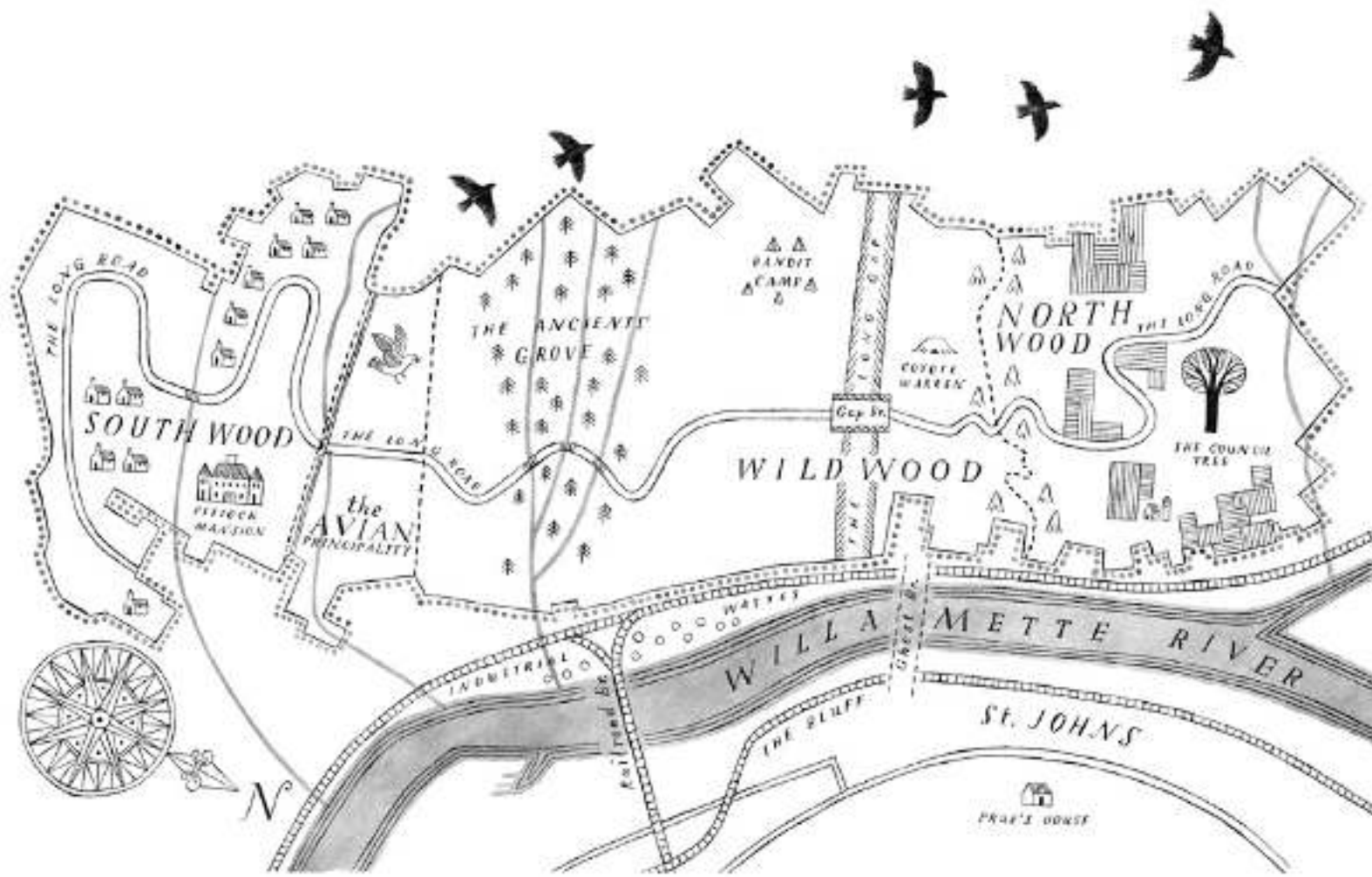
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MAP



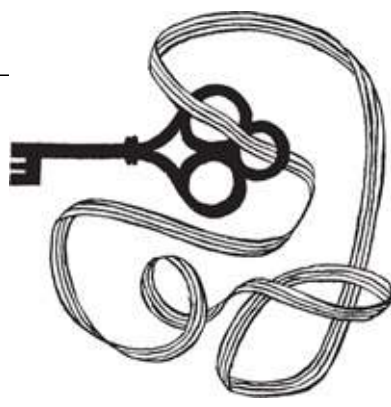
LIST OF COLOR PLATES



- 1. The strange wolf stared silently into the glow of the fire.*
- 2. A length of bright golden filigree connected each of these objects in the mandala, one to the other, sign of the interconnectedness of the Wood.*
- 3. The three girls crested a small hillock and found themselves looking down into the trough of a narrow vale, where lay nestled a quaint wooden cottage.*
- 4. She approached the City of Moles, carefully watching each footfall so as to avoid adding any undue bloodshed to the chaos.*
- 5. The children of the Unthank Home for Wayward Youth were revolting.*



PART ONE



CHAPTER 1

A Boy and His Rat

Snow is falling.

Snow as white as a swan's feather, white as a trillium bloom. The whiteness is nearly blinding against the dark green and brown of the surrounding forest, and it lies in downy heaps between the quiet, dormant clutches of ivy and blackberry bushes. It is heaped against the bases of the tall fir trees, and it carpets the little trenches in the shallows around the wide cedar roots.

A road carves its way through the deep forest. It, too, is covered in an untouched shroud of snow.

In fact, if you didn't know there was a road beneath the snow, if you didn't know there were centuries of footsteps and hoofbeats and miles of weathered flagstones beneath the snow, you might just think it was a fallow stretch of woods, somehow left untouched by the forest's teeming greenery. There are no wheel tracks, no tire treads on this road. No footprints mar the delicate white of the snow. You might think it was a game trail, a stretch of ground where no tree could take root because of constant traffic of silent walkers: deer, elk, and bear. But even here, in this most removed area of the world, there are no animal tracks. The more the snow falls, the more the road disappears. It is becoming just another part of this vast, unending forest.

Listen.

The road is quiet.

Listen.

A distant clatter suddenly disrupts this placid stillness; it is the sound of wagon wheels and the whinnying of a horse, pushed to the limit of its strength. The horse's hooves beat a mad rhythm against the earth, a rhythm dulled by the mute of the snow. Look: Around a bend comes flying a carriage, two of its four wheels lifting from the ground momentarily to make the turn. Two sleek black horses are harnessed to the coach, and plumes of steam blow from their nostrils like smoke belching from a chimney. Perched above the horses is the coachman, a large man piled in black wool and a tattered top hat. He barks gruffly at the horses at their every stride, shouting, "GYAP!" and "FASTER, ON!" He spares no strike of the whip. There is a look of deep consternation on his face. He spends the brief moments between the snaps of his whip eyeing the surrounding forest warily.

Look closer: Below him, in the simple black carriage itself, sits a woman, alone. She is dressed in a fine silk gown, and her face is covered in a shimmering pink veil. Rings studded with bright jewel glint on her fingers. In her hands, she holds a delicate paper fan, which she opens and closes.

nervously. She, too, watches the flanking walls of trees surrounding the carriage, as if looking for someone or something within them. Opposite her sits an ornate chest, its sides decorated with gold and silver filigree. A lock holds the chest's twin clasps closed, the key to which hangs at the woman's throat by a thin golden cord. Antsy, she raps at the ceiling of the carriage with the fan.

The driver hears the rapping and spurs the horses on, raining even more blows from his whip down on their heaving flanks. A sudden flash of movement on the road ahead catches the driver's attention. He squints his eyes against the blinding white of the falling snow.

A boy is standing in the middle of the road.

But this is no ordinary boy. This boy is dressed in what appears to be an elegantly brocade officer's coat, like some infantryman from the Crimean War. His hair is black and curly and sprouts from beneath the coarse fur of an ushanka hat. He is idly swinging an emptied sling. There is a rat on his shoulder.

"STOP!" shouts the boy. "THIS IS A STICKUP!"

"You heard him!" shouts the rat. "Rein it in, fatso!"

The coachman hisses a curse under his breath. With a quick turn of his wrist, he has dropped the whip and has taken the reins in both of his hands. He snaps them eagerly, and the horses lean into the gallop. A cruel smile has appeared on the coachman's face. "HYA!" he shouts to the beleaguered horses.

The boy's face, formerly buoyed with confidence, falls. He swallows hard. "I—I'm serious!" he stammers.

The coachman's cracked lips have pulled back to reveal an astonishing row of yellow teeth. He is not slowing. The lady in the carriage gives a slight shriek as it careens along the snowy road. The boy quickly reaches down and pulls a rock from the ground. He wipes it clean of snow on his trousers and sets it into the cradle of his sling.

"Don't make me do this," he warns. It's not clear whether the coachman hears this; he is barreling toward the boy and the rat at an alarming rate.

With a casual expertise—he's evidently been practicing—the boy lets loose the stone from the sling, and it flies toward the coachman, who ducks just in time; the stone sails over his head to fall into the deep, snowy bracken of the forest. The boy does not have time to pick up another; the coachman is so close that the boy can smell the sweat coming off the horses.

The rat gives a little *ulp!* and dives into the gully at the side of the road. The boy follows him, and they tumble into a pile together. The carriage roars by. The horses, spooked at having so nearly missed hitting the two brigands, whinny noisily as they pass.

The veiled woman in the carriage clutches at the key at her throat. She gives a high-pitched warble of fear. The coachman, somewhat chuffed at his bravado, throws a look over his shoulder at the boy and his rat. "Better luck next time, suckers!" he shouts. His attention thus diverted, he does not see the cedar trunks as they fall, domino-like, in a crash of splinters to block the road ahead. Three of them. One after another. *Bam. Bam. Bam.*

The woman screams; the coachman swings his head to face forward and gives the reins a violent yank. The horses yawp. Their hooves scramble desperately against the slick surface of the road. The carriage tips and shimmies and emits a shuddering groan. Thinking quickly, the driver hollers an impassioned "HYA!" and deftly navigates the horses and carriage through the obstacle course of the fallen trees. Bodies, male and female, are appearing from the woods; they are dressed similarly to the boy, but their uniforms are mismatched. Some wear tattered shirts; some have bandannas covering their faces. They are all children. The oldest might be fifteen. They are staring with disbelief at the

coachman's ability to thread the cumbersome carriage with its two panicked horses through their trail. Within moments, the coachman has cleared the obstacles and has returned to his whip, urging the horses on.

In the meantime, the boy and the rat have picked themselves up from the roadside ditch and have brushed the clinging snow from their clothes. The rat leaps back up to the boy's shoulder as the boy puts his fingers to his lips and gives a shrill whistle. From the dense scrub of the forest comes a horse, a dappled brown-and-white pony. The boy throws himself astride the horse, the rat holding tight to the boy's epaulet, and kicks it into a gallop. Arriving at the fallen trees, he leaps the horse and clears the three cedars. A spray of snow and mud flies up when the horse makes landfall. The children in the woods have shaken themselves from their shock and are calling their mounts; soon the road is filled with galloping riders giving chase to the fleeing carriage.



The coachman, ahead, marks this. He curses the bandits' temerity. The wind is lashing at his face, the snow is now driving, icy.

Of the pursuing riders, the boy with the rat is clearly among the fastest. Many are unable to keep up the pace that the carriage is setting and fall away. Within minutes, only four remain: the boy, another older boy, and two girls. They draw closer to the speeding carriage and split apart, two on each side of the vehicle. The rat, holding tight to the boy's shoulder by a flap of his furry hat, issues a warning to the coachman: "Give up your gold," he shouts, "and you can go free!"

The coachman responds with a hair-raising curse that makes the boy blush, even in this moment of hectic of moments. He is now level with the carriage. He can see inside: the veiled woman, the key on her neck, the clasped ornate chest. The woman watches him curiously, her large brown eyes glinting from above the shimmering cloth at her face. The boy is momentarily distracted by the scene. The rat shouts, "LOOK OUT!"

In an effort to unseat his pursuers, the coachman has feinted the carriage to the left, and the boy nearly runs his pony directly into the coach's traces. He catches a shriek in his throat and veers the pony off the road. The pony's hooves hit the soft underbrush of the roadside and it falters; the ground drops away here and slopes down to a rushing brook far below. The boy braces for the fall, but the pony is nimble. In a flash, the boy's steed has righted itself and finds its footing again on the road. The boy whispers a word of thanks in its ear. They are back in the chase.

The carriage leads them now by several horse lengths. The three other bandits are struggling to keep up. One of the riders, a girl with straw-blond hair, has grabbed hold of the roof of the coach and is attempting to climb aboard. It is a risky ploy; the girl's face is set in concentration. The other two bandits, a boy and a girl, have managed to spur their mounts to ride parallel to the coach's horses. The

blond-haired girl grunts loudly and vaults from her horse; she barely manages to grab hold of the latticework that runs along the top of the carriage. Her horse veers away; her body swings against the carriage-side, eliciting another high-pitched scream from its passenger. The girl steadies herself and climbs to the top of the carriage, giving a triumphant whoop. She turns her head to the boy with the rat, who is still several horse-lengths behind.

“May the best bandit—” she begins. Her sentence is cut short when the carriage plows underneath a low-hanging bough and the girl is lifted from her perch in the blink of an eye. The boy with the rat must duck to avoid the girl’s dangling feet as he gallops his pony toward the carriage.

“Win,” finishes the girl, suspended from the limb of the tree.

The boy nods to the rat and grits his teeth in determination. There is now only he and the other girl. The other boy has fallen away from the chase, his mount limping into the underbrush.

“Aisling!” the boy shouts. “Get the horses!”

The girl, now parallel with the right-hand horse, has heard him. She is trying to get her hands on the horse’s bridle, but the coachman’s whip is foiling her every attempt. “Away, vile brigand!” shouts the coachman. The girl winces as the whip’s leather tip leaves a red welt on the back of her hand.

“Septimus,” hisses the boy to the rat, “think you could help out?”

The rat smiles. “I think I could do a little something.” The boy is now even with the carriage. He can hear the mewling of the maiden within. The rat leaps from the boy’s shoulder and lands on the nape of the coachman, who lets out a bloodcurdling scream.

“RRRRRATS!” he shouts. “I CAN’T STAND RATS!”

But the rodent has already crawled down the coachman’s shirt and is busy practicing a kind of Irish step dance between his naked shoulder blades. The coachman hollers and lets fall both the whip and the reins; the coach’s horses, confused, lose their gallop, and the boy and the girl are able to pull up even with them. With a quick glance at each other, the two bandits leap astride the carriage horses and pull them to a scrambling stop.

The coachman jumps from his seat and stumbles away down the road, his hands desperately clawing at his back. The girl and the boy watch him, laughing, before turning to the task at hand. The girl beckons graciously. “After you.” The boy bows and walks toward the idle carriage, radiating confidence. He swings the door open.

“Now, ma’am,” he says proudly, “if you wouldn’t mind turning over...”

His words falter. Inside, the woman has removed her veil to reveal a shocking, tangled nest of auburn facial hair.

Also: There is the barrel of a flintlock pistol pointing at him.

“I don’t think so,” says the passenger, in a husky (and very unladylike) baritone.

The boy is crestfallen. “But—” he begins.

“Bang,” says the passenger. He gives the boy a scolding rap on his forehead with the pistol barrel.

The boy stares and scratches at his temple, as if replaying the entire scene in his mind. He kicks his boots in the snow. The winter term of Bandit Training has begun. And Curtis has just failed his first test.



In what might seem like another world from the one in which this scene was playing out, but was in fact only a handful of miles distant, Prue was staring out of a second-floor window, watching the snow fall and disintegrate against the lawn of George Middle School. *Typical Portland winter*, she thought.

falling slush. With every dropping clump, she felt her chin bore farther into the palm of her hand. ~~couple walking along the sidewalk gingerly avoided the gathering puddles along their way, their coats~~ lapels folded up to cover their exposed necks. Cars, dusted with a layer of brackish gray snow, splashed rooster tails of icy water from potholes as they swished along the wet streets. It looked positively miserable out.

“Prue!”

The voice sounded in Prue’s mind like someone calling to her over a vast distance; like a lighthouse keeper hailing a ship in a gale. She chose to ignore it. It came again:

“Prue McKeel!”

It was sounding closer. More present. A master of ceremonies beckoning the star performer to the stage. She began to lift her chin from her palm.

“Earth to Prue McKeel!” This time, an explosion of laughter followed the voice. The noise abruptly brought Prue back to her present circumstances. She swiveled upright in her chair and scanned the room. Life Science, third period. The entire class was staring at her, pointing and laughing. Prue felt her face go deep red.

“Sorry,” she managed. “I was ... distracted.”

Ms. Darla Thennis, olive skin, floral dashiki, stared on from behind a lectern at the front of the room. She adjusted her wire-rim glasses and smoothed her crow-black hair. She then silenced the class with a wave of her hand. “Your project, Prue?”

The following images flashed in quick succession through her mind: her mother digging a canning jar from the top cupboard; Prue shoving a leftover piece of baguette into the jar and setting it on the windowsill; her father mentioning, that morning, that he’d gone ahead and thrown away a jar full of disgusting mold-covered bread, and why on earth would there be a jar full of mold just lying around?

“My dad,” began Prue. “My dad threw it away.”

More snickers erupted from the class.

Ms. Thennis peered at Prue from above her glasses. “Uncool, Prue,” she said. “Deeply uncool.”

“I’ll let him know that,” replied Prue.

Her teacher studied Prue for a moment, clearly trying to gauge whether the response was meant as a kind of slight. Ms. Thennis was new this quarter—Mrs. Estevez, the class’s normal teacher, had unexpectedly resigned, citing health issues. Darla Thennis was from Eugene and clearly prided herself on being cool, being at the kids’ level. She never failed to remind the students that she loved pop music. She made strange growling sounds every time the principal, Mr. Bream, left the room, and walked the halls engulfed in a dense cloud of patchouli. She pushed her glasses back up the bridge of her nose and scanned the classroom.

“Bethany?” Ms. Thennis asked. “I don’t suppose you’d be ready to exhibit your project, considering that Miss McKeel’s father has made it impossible for her to exhibit her own?”

Bethany Bruxton, relishing the moment, shot a condescending glance at Prue before standing for attention. “Yes, Ms. Thennis,” she replied.

“Please,” corrected the teacher, “it’s Darla.”

Bethany smiled shyly and said, “Darla.”

“If you wouldn’t mind, then ...” Darla Thennis waved the student to the front of the room.

Tugging at the hem of her black turtleneck, Bethany walked to the far side of the classroom, where a long table held a variety of students’ projects. Opening the door of a lamp-lit greenhouse, Bethany removed a tall, flourishing tomato plant and walked it to the front of the class.

“This semester, I’m working on grafting,” she said, cradling the plant in her arms. “The idea is

create a more disease-resistant plant, and one that will produce totally delicious tomatoes.”

~~Ugh~~, thought Prue. ~~What a showoff~~. They'd been class partners the fall semester, and Bethany had gone out of her way to sideline Prue in all their experiments. She'd taken full credit for the leaf collage they'd made, even though Prue had collected all the ochre-colored oak leaves herself.

Ms. Thennis nodded along with Bethany's speech. "Rad," said Darla Thennis. Prue glared.

"Thanks, Darla. I'm happy to report that it's doing really well," Bethany continued. "And the ground seems to be taking. And while there's no fruit to report as yet, I expect in a couple of weeks we'll start to see a few nice blooms."

"Very cool," prompted Darla, inviting the class to join in. The seventh graders in third-period Life Science murmured a collective, but decidedly unenthusiastic, *ooh* at the teacher's behest. Prue stayed silent.

She was listening.

The tomato plant was issuing a low, angry hum.

Prue scanned the room to see if anyone else heard this. Everyone was staring listlessly at Bethany.

The hum was getting louder; it quavered as it hitched upward in volume. As it grew, it became clear that it was a hum of discomfort and frustration.

Sorry, thought Prue, directing her thoughts to the plant. She could certainly sympathize; it wasn't even the plant's proper season and here it was: being grown in a science class hothouse. And she couldn't imagine having had a fellow tomato plant's limb grafted onto your stalk. It was positively barbaric!



The tomato plant seemed to heave a sigh.

Prue had an idea. *You know what would be funny?* she thought.

RMPPH, hummed the tomato plant. Prue laid it out.

Suddenly, Bethany flinched her head backward, crinkling her nose. The students gasped. It had appeared, for a split second, that the top leaf of the tomato plant had actually slapped Bethany in the nose. It was evident that Ms. Thennis had not seen it; she shot a glare over the classroom. "Now kids, c'mon," she said.

Gasp! the classroom heaved again. It had happened once more; the topmost limb of the small green tomato plant had fainted upward and undeniably given its holder another swift swat across the

nose. A look of bewildered terror had spread across Bethany's face, and she began holding the plant at arm's length. Following the students' gaze, a very confused Ms. Thennis turned to watch Bethany as she inched toward the little greenhouse.

"M-maybe it needs a little more time," managed Bethany, her face grown perfectly pale. She gingerly placed the plant back in the glass confines of the greenhouse and backed away. "It was totally healthy this morning."

A low, satisfied whistle had replaced the tomato plant's unhappy hum.

Ms. Thennis's eyes swiveled to Prue; she stared at her with shock and disbelief. Prue smiled and returned her gaze to the window, to the falling slush beyond the glass and to the gathering puddles on the rain-swept streets.



*FROM THE DESK OF LEE BREAM, PRINCIPAL
GEORGE MIDDLE SCHOOL*

Date: 2/15/—

Anne and Lincoln McKeel

Parents of Prue McKeel

Dear Mr. and Mrs. McKeel:

Since your daughter's admission to this school last year, she has proved herself to be a bright and independent thinker. Her promise was judged to be very great.

It saddens me, however, to report that this promise has been somewhat clouded of late. Since the beginning of last term, her grades have fallen precipitously, and her behavior in class has been reported as being—across the board—uncharacteristic. She has shown little of her former interest in her schoolwork and has taken to exhibiting a very unbecoming attitude to her teachers. The bearer of this note, Ms. Darla Thennis, has kindly volunteered to speak to you on this subject, and we hope that her involvement can lead to a happy resolution.

We understand that the crisis your family underwent earlier in the school year, the disappearance of your young son, must have been incredibly difficult. We are aware of the effect that such trauma can have on the minds of our children. However, we would wish to get to the bottom of any unfortunate backsliding and nip the problem in the bud lest it should become insurmountable and lead to a promising student being suspended, or worse—expelled.

Sincerely,

Lee Bream

Principal, George Middle School

Prue lowered the letter from her eyes, allowing the faces of the three adults in the kitchen to rise over the page like the orbiting moons of some distant planet. The room was silent, save for the regular sproing coming from Prue's little brother Mac's doorjamb-mounted bouncing chair.

She shrugged. "I don't know what you want me to say," she offered.

Sproing.

Her mother and father shared a concerned glance. "Hon," said her mother, "perhaps you should..."

Sproing.

Prue's dad looked away from his wife to the dashiki'd teacher, the third of this celestial

triumvirate. She was leaning against the refrigerator.

“Ms....,” began Prue’s dad.

Sproing.

“Please,” said the teacher, her gaze transfixed on the little boy in the bouncing chair, “call me Darla.” She seemed to be waiting for the next loud—

Sproing.

“Darla,” continued Prue’s dad, “I have to say this comes as a complete shock to us, I mean .. *Sproing.* “It’s been a difficult few months, for sure, but we feel like this is inevitable, considering the kind of ...” *Sproing.* “Craziness that we’d all been through at the beginning of the year and .. *Sproing.* He paused, noticing that Darla’s attention was being forcibly diverted to the bouncing chair in the baby seat with every contraction of the seat’s spring.

“Sweetheart,” he said, finally, to his wife, “would you mind taking Mac out of that thing for a second?”

Once Mac had been removed from the bouncing chair and Prue’s mother had returned to the kitchen, the discussion recommenced. Darla Thennis: “Listen, I know what you’re going through—this is all very normal for a child of her age—we just don’t want her to fall too far behind.”

Prue remained silent. She studied the three adults intently. They were talking about her as if she weren’t even in the room. It made her all the more disinclined to include herself. She kicked her Wellies against the cork-tiled floor and attempted to imagine her three interrogators away. She envisioned an earthquake sending a jagged crack through the middle of the kitchen, consuming the adults in one swift tremor.

Darla evidently caught on to Prue’s disconnectedness and began speaking directly to her. “How were your final exams last semester were dismal; it’s like you’re not even there in class, like your head is just somewhere else—in some faraway place.”

It is, thought Prue.

“And don’t even get me started on your absences,” said Darla, looking over at Prue’s parents.

“Absences?” This came from Prue’s mother. “What absences?”

Darla fixed her gaze on Prue. “You want to tell them?”

“Well,” said Prue, looking up from her boots, “there have been just a few days...”

“A few days?” sputtered her dad, staring at his daughter in disbelief.

“A few days where I didn’t quite make it in time and I thought, Well, that means I missed homeroom, and if I miss homeroom, that means I won’t be ready for World Studies, and if I wasn’t ready for that—how was I going to manage in math?” She waved her hands in front of her face, as if conjuring the disorienting mists of a dense fog. “It was like a long line of dominoes falling. I decided to just bag it and read at the coffee shop.”

Prue’s father smiled sheepishly and looked at Ms. Thennis. “At least she’s reading, right?”

His wife ignored the comment. “And this ... this ... domino thing—happened on several occasions?” she asked, her eyes boring into Prue’s bangs, which were now conveniently covering her downcast face.

“Five, to be precise,” answered Ms. Thennis.

“Five?” pronounced Prue’s father and mother, in unison.

“FITHE!” came Mac’s voice from the living room. “POO! FITHE!”

“Ugh,” said Prue.

But the truth was that she hadn’t been reading at the coffee shop. And she hadn’t really even “made it in time” to school. The truth was that Prue McKeel, twelve years old, would sometimes walk

up in her comfortable bed, in her comfortable house, with her comfortable family, and feel a very sudden and very sharp *tug*. On those days, she'd pull herself out of bed and try her best to go through the repetitions of her daily life—to ignore this mysterious *tug*—but sometimes she'd get as far as her bike and she'd feel compelled to pedal it in the opposite direction of her school. And this *tug* would be guiding the way. It would *tug* her down Lombard and *tug* her past the opening shops and *tug* her down Willamette and *tug* her past the college until this strange *tug* would deposit her, bike and all, on the bluff, overlooking that vast fabric of trees across the river that was the Impassable Wilderness. And that's where she would spend the better part of the day, just staring at that wide field of green. Remembering. On those days, the thought of going to school seemed perfectly out of the question.

The snap of a finger. “Hellooo?” chimed her mother. “I swear it's like your brain's been abducted by aliens or something.”

Prue calmly looked each of the three adults in the eye, one after another. “Mom,” she said, “Darla, Ms. Thennis—I'm sorry, Darla. I appreciate you bringing these concerns to my attention, and I'm sorry for any disappointment I might've caused. Excuse me, but I'd like to go on a walk right now. I will meditate on everything you guys have said.”

And with that, she turned heel and walked out the back door, leaving a flummoxed huddle of grown-ups watching her depart.



CHAPTER 2

The Messenger; Another I.W.

They were an odd assemblage: the two young boys, the two young girls, the large man in a top hat, the skinny bearded man in a dress, and the rat. They stood in a line in the middle of the wide, snow-covered road, watching as two riders approached on horseback. When the riders arrived and had dismounted, the man in the dress stepped forward from the line.

“Brendan,” he said, in greeting. He was visibly shivering; the chiffon of his frayed gown rippled in the chill breeze. His posture was hunched, his arms folded across his chest.

“William,” replied the man, serious, nodding a chin that was forested in a deep tangle of red whiskers. He wore a fairly dirty officer’s coat and a pair of riding britches, patched at the knees. A blue-black tattoo snaked up the side of his forehead. He studied the salmon-gowned man for a time before a smirk rolled out across his mouth. “The pink,” he said, “really ... brings out your eyes.”

The top-hatted man stifled a laugh. Curtis, standing just behind the bandit William, joined in on the laughter; he was rewarded for this by a penetrating glare from Brendan.

“Who said this was funny?” he shot at Curtis, again serious. The smile abruptly disappeared from the boy’s face. A wind had picked up, blowing the remaining flurries of snow sideways across the road, and the little flakes clung obstinately to the fur of Curtis’s hat.

“Henry, William. Back to camp.” The man in the top hat and the man in the dress scampered away, the latter doing this with some difficulty until he’d hiked the hem of his skirt above his pale, hairy knees. Brendan returned his gaze to the remaining bandits. “Colm: Mind your horsemanship. You were pushing too hard. You’ve got to have a better feel for your mount.” He held his leather-gloved hands out to model his words. “Let up on the reins; feel the strain of the horse. Only urge on when you’ve got the power to do so.”

“Aye, Brendan,” responded Colm.

“Now, back to camp. Get ice on that pony’s shin. And it’s two more weeks of horsemanship for you.” Brendan watched as the boy jogged away toward a limping horse in the distance.

Looking back at the line of four: “Carolyn, solid job. The hard work you’ve been putting in—shows. Quite an improvement from last week’s drill. As for you, Aisling.” Here he smirked a little—Aisling was the pursuer who had been clotheslined by the cedar bough. There were still bits of twigs and moss in her hair, and her face was smeared with tree sap. “Not so cocky next time, eh?”

“Aye, Brendan,” responded Aisling, chastened.

“Now back to camp with ye.” The two girls sprinted from the line as if they were running a dash and had just been waiting for the starter pistol. Only Aisling hazarded a look backward. She gave Curtis a quick, reaffirming smile—a moment that he barely had an opportunity to enjoy before the

wiry whiskers of Brendan's beard were inches from his forehead. They smelled like wet dog.

"As for you," began Brendan, drawing out the words in a low growl. "As for you: I've lost to many good bandits who made that same move. They think it's all in the bag, everything's taken care of, and BANG." His hand, shaped like a pistol and pointed at Curtis's forehead, gave a little recoil. "Dead. All because of what?"

"They didn't consider the passenger."

"They didn't WHAT?"

"THEY DIDN'T CONSIDER THE PASSENGER!"

"Right," said Brendan. "Biggest mistake you can make. Not only is the passenger just as likely to be armed as anyone, he's likely to be the most dangerous—in my time, I've seen more than one jumped-up banker come out of a carriage with pistols blazing, all panicked, and take out more of his own armed guards than bandits. Never open that door—don't even approach it—till you're sure whoever's inside isn't going to come out fighting. Got it?"

"Yeah, I got it," responded Curtis, nervously adjusting his furry cap. Brendan reached up and gave the ushanka a firm pat, pushing the brim down over Curtis's eyes.

"Good," said Brendan, his voice softening. "I'd hate to lose our most promising recruit."

Curtis beamed. It was the first time he'd heard such praise from the Bandit King during the many weeks of intensive training. It had been hard initially; for some reason, even mounting the pony without nearly toppling sidelong to the ground took a good two weeks to master, and Brendan hadn't passed up a single opportunity to hector him for it. But he could feel he was improving; he knew that Brendan did not give such commendations lightly.

Septimus cleared his throat. "Um," inserted the rat, "what about me? Did you see that move? Straight down his back!"

Looking down at the rat: "Very good, Septimus. But an easy target; you know Henry's squeamish about rodents. He's going to be traumatized for weeks."

Septimus cracked his knuckles. "It's a joy to have such an effect on a man."

The Bandit King laughed before saying, "You two will make fine coach-robbers. I have no doubt. His voice went steely as he continued, "Though I can't say that you'll have a chance to practice on the real thing."

This much was true: For the past few months, the rustling parties that had been sent out from the camp had been coming back empty-handed. There were fewer and fewer carriages on the road these days, and those travelers that did brave the frozen path were rarely carrying anything more than a few bushels of dried onions and wilted winter greens. It was severe enough for Curtis to notice; the elder bandits were all grumbling how it had been among the worst dry spells they'd ever seen. They said it was a herald of bad times.

The wind picked up, and a new front of falling snow moved through the trees. Winter was in full sway, and the light felt ever dim, even at midday. But now, at the first breath of evening, a dark mist was settling over the branches and obscuring the distant bends of the Long Road. Brendan shivered, pulled his coat and gestured to the two remaining bandits-in-training. "That's enough for today—let's go back to the camp. There are many more points to review, and we have to be ready for tomorrow's . . . His voice dropped away as they began their walk toward the awaiting horses. Something had caught his attention. He brought up his hand. "Hold," he said. "Something's coming."

Curtis and Septimus froze; they hadn't heard anything. Septimus sniffed the air briefly before scrambling up Curtis's pant leg and coat to arrive at his shoulder. Again he sniffed the air. "Bird?" he said.

Brendan, his hand still an open palm, nodded. “A big one.”

Suddenly, a crashing noise exploded from the canopy of trees above them, sending a flurry of smaller birds twittering away. A shower of broken branches toppled to the road below. The horses in the road spooked and whinnied. Brendan’s hand went instinctively to the saber hilt at his side. Out of the sky fell the crumpled form of something blue and gray and feathered. It slammed into the ground with a pained squawk; a spray of dirt and snow erupted at its landfall.

Silence followed. Brendan: “Who’s there? Name yourself!”

The lump of feathers quivered slightly where it lay. Finally, its long neck rose from its body, like the articulating antenna of a lunar rover, at the top of which was the stately beak of a heron. The bird shook its head and picked at the dirt that had sullied its wing.

“Are you okay?” This was Curtis, having recovered from the surprise.

The heron’s response was unexpected; it was defensive, embarrassed. “I’m fine, thanks,” it said acidly. “Just fine.”

“Who are you?” called Brendan. “And what business do you have in Wildwood, waterbird?”

As if ignoring the Bandit King’s demands, the heron took its time pulling its long body from the snow. Curtis was awed by the majesty of the creature; by the time it had bloomed to its full height, it was like a metamorphosis had taken place. What had been a dirty gray lump on the ground was suddenly the towering, graceful form of one of the most striking birds Curtis had ever seen: a long, slender-beaked head topped an S-curved neck that led to a great egg of a body, covered in long, lashlike, white and gray feathers, all supported by two spindly legs. Stretching its neck to its full height to take in its new surroundings, the bird stood easily as tall as Curtis.

“My name is Maude,” replied the heron finally. “And I’ve been sent by the Crown Prince of the Avians.” The bird swiveled her head to look directly into Curtis’s eyes. “I’ve come for you, boy. Your friend, the girl McKeel, seems to be in grave danger.”



By the time the car’s wheels had left the familiarity of the pavement and began crunching along the wet gravel of the artery road, the passengers had grown silent. Elsie Mehlberg, nine years old, fiddled with the shoulder strap of her seat belt and watched her parents as their faces grew progressively more sallow and concerned. She could tell they were struggling with the decision they’d made—but what choice did they have? Elsie didn’t blame them. And while her older sister, Rachel, had put up more of a fight when the plan was initially presented to them, in the end she’d begrudgingly agreed.

The snow had given way to a heavy, cold rain, and the drops made thick streaks down the car’s backseat window, distorting the already imposing metal buildings into bulging and fractured shapes. They’d crossed the boundary into the Industrial Wastes some time ago. It was a place Elsie’d never been; it was cold and ominous. The rusted white chemical tanks that lined the gravel roads, with the winding staircases and wiry tresses of plumbing, looked almost science fiction in their otherworldliness. Somewhere, deep inside this nest of clattering machinery, she imagined bearded dwarves at work, long removed from the sunshine of the above-world—only instead of broadsword and battle-axes, they were making refrigerator doors and motorcycle camshafts.

Elsie looked back again to her father in the driver’s seat as he navigated the family sedan through the Wastes’ narrow roads. There were filigrees of gray hair at his temples; Elsie was sure they hadn’t been there the summer before. And those deep creases that made a kind of canyon landscape on his brow—certainly those were new as well.

All since her brother's disappearance.

~~The initial shock had been tremendous; a fog had descended over the house. Whatever joy had~~ previously lived under that roof had all but disappeared. And Elsie hated her brother for it. First had come the police. They squatted down on the living room furniture like elephants in polyester and scribbled down little notes while her mother and father tearfully repeated everything they remembered since the last time Curtis had been seen. Then came the reporters, the news cameramen, the rubbernecking neighbors walking by the picture window and peering in at their broken, desperate family. Finally, Lydia, Elsie's mom, had drawn the curtains to block out the inquisitive, and the windows remained that way for months. The living room, all through the fall, stayed as dark and shadowed as their hearts. Elsie's dad, David, became withdrawn and spent hours on end in his home office, standing vigil on a variety of internet message boards, imploring anyone who would listen to help him find his son. Elsie would sit up at night in her bed, listening to her parents' hushed conversations in the room next door, and would alternately curse her brother and plead for his return. "C'mon, Curtis," she'd whisper. "Just quit it already. Come home."

So when Elsie's dad came running into the kitchen from his office one day, announcing he'd gotten a lead, that someone in Istanbul, Turkey—of all places—had seen a young American boy who fit Curtis's description on the streets of this ancient city, the entire family erupted into a fit of unbridled celebration. It wasn't until they began investigating the cost of airfare and lodging that it was decided that the two girls, Elsie and Rachel, would have to stay in Portland while the elder Mehlbergs flew to Turkey to search for their son. And where would the girls stay? Without a suitable family member in town to take them in, the only option was the local orphanage, where, for a reasonable price, a desperate parent could board his or her children for however much time was needed.

"The Jamisons did it with their kids when they went on that scuba vacation," was all the reassurance the two younger Mehlbergs were given.

And so here they were, slowly winding the labyrinthine byways of the Industrial Wastes, to arrive at the Joffrey Unthank Home for Wayward Youth. A neon sign shone in the dim light ahead of them, advertising as much—with the helpful addendum below it, a flickering string of words that seemed to be at the mercy of a lesser power source: AND INDUSTRIAL MACHINE PARTS.

Rachel, who'd remained silent the entire journey, looked up and gasped when the building came into view. Her pale face appeared briefly from between the twin curtains of her long, straight black hair, and her thin shoulders shuddered beneath her threadbare Corrosion of Conformity T-shirt. "I can't believe this," she said quietly. She fiddled with the little tangle of dark bands that encircled her left wrist.

"Now, honey," said Lydia from the front passenger seat, "we've been through this. We just don't have any other options." She craned her head to look at the two girls in the backseat. "Think of it this way: You're doing your part in helping to find Curtis."

"Right," responded Rachel glumly.

"Whoa," said Elsie, staring ahead through the whisks of the windshield wipers. "That place looks creepy."

Silence followed as everyone in the car gave tacit agreement. The gravel drive the car was following finally cleared the rows of windowless metal buildings and chemical tanks to arrive at an open space, fenced in by a wall of chain-link fence. In the middle of the clearing stood a drab building seemingly transported to the spot from another era. Its slate-gray stucco walls were stained by lichen and soot, a surface broken regularly by tall mullioned windows. The roof, shale shingles sporting a

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