

Journey into the Realm: The Elf Girl

Markelle Grabo

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Prologue

Everyone is different. No two babies are born alike. This fact can be explained scientifically, genetically; religiously....The possibilities are endless.

"Hi, my name's Ramsey," I said, as I sat down on the school bus seat.

The five-year-old boy beside me watched me intently for a few moments and then asked, "What's wrong with your ears?"

Sure, there are many explanations for why people are so different from one another, explanations that made sense.

Could magic be classified as one of them?

"What do you mean?" I asked, tugging self-consciously at my hair.

"They're all pointy and stuff," he pointed out, scrunching his face as if he smelled some pungent odor.

I didn't think so; not for a very long time, at least.

"So?" I challenged. "My mom says it's because I'm unique."

"Nu-uh," he bit back. "It's because you're weird."

"No, it's not!" I cried, tears forming in my eyes.

"Yes, it is!" the boy yelled, loud enough for everyone else on the bus to hear. "You're like an elf!"

I once lived in a small city in Wisconsin with my parents and sister, Dina, who was one year younger than I. My parents and sister loved and supported me, but it wasn't enough to chase away the impact others had on me when they saw me for the first time.

I lived a sheltered life before that first day of kindergarten. I didn't realize what effect my ears had on others until a little boy my age pointed it out to me.

"Elf Girl, Elf Girl!" he chanted. It wasn't long before others chimed in as well.

"Stop it!" I shouted. "Please! You're not being very nice!"

For fifteen years, everyone, including myself, knew I was different. The problem was that no one knew *why*. There were things about me that others just couldn't explain or understand, and I had so many questions that couldn't possibly be answered.

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"I can't invite you to my birthday party, Ramsey," Olivia, one of my classmates in middle school, told me the day before summer vacation.

"Why not?" I asked, dreading her answer.

"Because everyone would make fun of me for having someone like you at my party," she said simply, shrugging her shoulders.

"Someone like me?"

"It's not that I think you're weird. It's just that others...well, others do, and I can't afford to lose all my friends right before high school." She patted me on the shoulder. "I'm sorry. Have a good summer."

I took a deep breath, collecting myself, before walking out of the school alone.

I never enjoyed watching T.V. or going to the mall with friends. Instead, I spent my time outdoors in the forest next to my home, the only wooded area for a good twenty miles. It was sort of a sanctuary, one that represented true beauty to me. I would run through the trees, feeling the wind splash against my face. I would sit there for hours, not speaking or moving, because I didn't need to. It was the perfect place. The place I felt most like myself. The one place in the world where I didn't feel constricted or confined, but instead felt free.

"Hey, beautiful," a boy I bumped into in the hallway said on my first day of high school.

I smiled and tucked my hair behind my ears. His expression changed from interest to disgust.

"Freak," he muttered, before stalking away.

Mom said I was like everyone else and that my looks had nothing to do with me, but I never believed her. What she said, unfortunately, never made any sense. I had already taken Biology, and I knew that the way a person looked didn't happen by chance. Genetics were involved. By the looks of it, my parents did not have the genes for pale skin, straight blonde hair, green eyes, or pointy ears. I am not even sure if that last one was a possible genotype.

No one ever said I was ugly growing up, unless of course they saw my ears. One look at the things on the side of my head, and

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people ran from me like Olympic sprinters. At first, it bothered me, and then I just got used to it.

“She should just cut them off or something. For her, no ears would be better than what she has,” a girl snickered.

“Totally,” her friend replied, checking her reflection in the mirror of the girl’s bathroom. “Or she should just move to the North Pole.”

The two girls erupted into a bout of giggles.

They never knew I was in the stall behind them.

Yes, I was different. Why was I? I didn’t understand for a long time.

One of the names others called me stuck throughout those first fifteen years, and it wasn’t simply because it was used against me so often. The name seemed important somehow, connected to me in some other way than as an insult.

No, it was something more.

That little boy on the bus was the first to utter the words.

“Elf Girl! Elf Girl!” he cried.

I put my hands over my pointy ears and realized I was far more different than I once believed.

~1~

The Water

“Ramsey, Dina, time for dinner!” Mom called one Sunday evening.

On Sunday evenings, the family *had* to eat together, no exceptions. There were no friends, no work...nothing but good old quality time. This rule was easy for me to follow, because I had only one friend, but extremely painful for Dina. I think every time my mom said no to friends, my sister died a little inside. The thought was definitely an exaggeration, but to me it was the only remark that came close to describing her feelings.

“Be right there, Mom!” I shouted back, knowing we had little time before she came up to bring us down herself. “Come on, Dina, it’s time for dinner.”

“Okay, I’m almost finished deciding what to wear for tomorrow. Hey, should I go with the dark denim skirt or the light?”

“Does it really matter?” I wondered, eager to get downstairs and avoid my mother’s wrath.

“Of course it does, Ramsey!” With a dramatic sigh, she threw her skirts down on her bed. “I can’t believe that you are so fashion impaired.”

“Sorry...” I shrugged.

“Don’t worry about it. Not everyone can pick out clothes like I can,” she beamed, standing proud as if she would receive some kind of award for her talents.

“You got that right,” I muttered.

I didn’t hate clothes, but I rarely cared what I wore as long as it didn’t draw unwanted attention to myself. With the way I looked, the first thing someone noticed after observing the outfit I was wearing was my ears. So I usually kept my style very plain. My outfit often consisted of a pair of dark jeans, a colored t-shirt, and a zip-up sweatshirt. The sweatshirt always had to have a hood for when I was out of school or in public places. I didn’t want people

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staring at my freakish ears while I was out shopping. That would be beyond annoying...not to mention awkward.

“Come on, girls, dinner is waiting!”

“I’m finished. Let’s go and eat!” Dina decided finally.

She ran past me and down the stairs. I followed her at a slower pace.

“So how has school been going?” Dad asked, as we all sat down to eat. He was always the first to start the dinner conversation.

“Um, it’s okay,” I muttered.

Actually, going to school sucked, as it did for most people my age. I mean, who actually enjoyed spending their entire day shuffling through crowded hallways and listening to boring lectures? It was a little different for me, however. School was not only boring, but also a complete waste of time. It came so easy to me that I could barely stand it. The only challenge I got was in Gym class or Spanish, but even that was stretching it.

“Honey, what happened? Are kids still making fun of your ears?” Mom asked, obviously very concerned.

“No, Mom...that was grade school. I think people have gotten used to them by now,” I lied, because people actually still made fun of them. But I didn’t want to get my mother started.

“Honey, remember what I told you, just because you are different...”

“It doesn’t mean I’m not just like everyone else,” I interrupted, touching a hand to my forehead. “I know, Mom. You don’t have to explain it again.” I sighed and prayed for a new subject.

Thankfully, the ringing of the front doorbell put an end to the less than lovely conversation.

“Oh, that must be your grandmother. Hold that thought, Ramsey,” Mom said, and ran to get the door.

Yeah right, I told myself. That was one thought I would rather have run away.

Mom was right; at the door was Elizabeth Wilder, my grandmother. She had come every Sunday for dinner since Dina and I were both in diapers, without fail.

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“Hi, Mom! Come on in, we were just starting,” Mom instructed as my grandma stepped through the doorway.

“Hi, dear, sorry I’m late,” she replied, giving her daughter a hug. “Ramsey, your mother was just telling me on the phone about how well you have been doing in school. It makes me very proud to call you my granddaughter.”

As anyone could guess after a day in the life of me, I hated attention, even from my grandma, unfortunately. After years of receiving bad attention, the good wasn’t much different.

“Thanks. Did Mom also mention that Dina made the Pom Squad?” I asked.

Because I wasn’t fond of the spotlight, passing the attention to Dina helped a lot. It was always easy to get Dina going on about herself.

“Yes, she did,” she remarked, graciously turning toward my sister. “I can’t wait to come and see your routines!”

“Thanks! I’m so excited to start performing,” Dina said enthusiastically.

As the rest of the family chatted on about Dina’s school life, I slowly picked through my food, unsatisfied with the way things were. Sure, I loved my family. But it seemed as though I was always reaching for something more, yet I could never grasp what I wanted. I yearned for a life away from this place. I wanted to be away from my boring school and away from this boring life. Nothing seemed to excite me anymore. It wasn’t anyone’s fault, but I had a feeling there was more for me out there if I had enough strength to reach for it.

I often imagined what life would be like in the books I read, like the fantasy novels, where fairies, dragons, and mermaids reigned; where power and confidence could be found in the heart’s of all, and not only in their dreams. That would be the life for me. It would be interesting, not mind-numbing like school, and I wouldn’t be the only one who appeared to be so unusual. I sighed and pushed my plate away, feeling foolish and immature, reminding myself that the books were only make-believe.

They were just fantasies.

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“Well, girls, I think it’s time to say goodbye to Grandma and get ready for bed,” Mother said later that evening.

“Your mother is right. Bye, dears,” Grandma said, giving us each a kiss goodnight.

“Bye, Grandma!” we both replied.

Once the door shut, Dina and I climbed the stairs to our rooms. It was late, and even though this meant homework time for Dina, we always retreated into our rooms after Sunday dinner. For Dina, it created the illusion that she was actually going to sleep, not rushing through her Biology work she put off all weekend. In my case, it was the perfect opportunity to spend some much-needed time alone, especially after a long day.

I absolutely adored my room. It was painted forest green and decorated with flowers lining the ceiling. Mom had them painted on a few years earlier. They weren’t girly princess flowers, but rather very elegant and beautiful.

My room had a simple layout. I had a wooden desk, a large dresser, a mirror, a queen-sized bed, and a bookshelf overflowing with books. It was rather unlike Dina’s room.

Her walls were soft pinks and blues. She had a queen-sized bed like mine, but also a vanity for her makeup, a large walk-in closet, and another closet filled with all of her shoes. Her walls had posters of boy bands and movie stars. I never really liked going into her room. The word *cluttered* was a huge understatement.

It wasn’t as if Dina was my parents’ favorite child. I was sure that if I wanted all the stuff she had, I would get it. However, what Dina had was simply not my taste.

“Goodnight, girls,” Mom called to us from the hall.

“Goodnight, Mom,” I replied, the first to respond. I guessed Dina was texting on her phone...again.

“Goodnight, Mom!” Dina called, and I heard the beep of the OFF button on her cell phone.

Nights were always the worst for me. Sleep rarely came until the wee hours, when the rest of my family was sound asleep. I

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couldn't seem to make myself sleep for very long. I was awake until midnight and up at around four o'clock the next morning, without feeling one ounce of drowsiness.

Usually, I snuck out and went for nighttime walks, but tonight rain was quickly developing into a storm. It wasn't as if I disliked the rain; I just didn't want my clothes getting wet. It was too risky to leave wet clothes in the hamper because my parents could figure out I snuck out of the house.

I decided to read instead. An activity that was both quiet and productive. Staying up twiddling my thumbs wouldn't be the best use of my spare time. I quietly slipped out from beneath my covers and lightly tiptoed across the wooden floor to the shelf. Another reason I loved my room was that the floorboards never squeaked.

I scanned the shelf for something I hadn't read, but found nothing. I remembered the last time I went to the bookstore. Two weeks ago, I had bought three books, and as usual, I read them right away. I had planned to go today but had totally forgotten. I looked at the clock on my dresser. It read ten p.m. The bookstore closed at eleven.

Guess I'm going outside after all, I decided. I had nothing else to do, considering sleep was out of the question for at least a few more hours. I quickly threw on jeans and a large hooded sweatshirt over my pajama top, put on some tennis shoes, grabbed my phone and wallet, and headed down the stairs. I would just have to do my own laundry before anyone could notice how wet my clothes were.

Remembering I had to lock the door, I picked up the key in the basket and stuffed it into the large pocket of my sweatshirt with my phone and wallet. The door opened easily and noiselessly. I never had trouble leaving the house.

The bookstore was only three blocks from our subdivision, *Forest Grove*. The area held all two-story homes with perfectly groomed lawns the size of swimming pools. I was surprised some of the homes could even fit pools into their property. What I liked about it was the forest that surrounded us. Its tall trees and small ponds here and there made it the perfect place to spend my time.

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Luckily, sidewalks led the way to the bookstore. To have a car hit me would definitely not be good. I almost ran the three blocks to the store. I loved the night, but the anticipation of being able to read was too great to walk, and I didn't want to be drenched when I walked through the entrance of the store.

I felt bad about sneaking out; I always did. However, tonight it was worse considering I had gone to church earlier. Sneaking out of the house wasn't exactly a Christian thing to do.

The silver cross that dangled from my neck bounced slightly as my hurried pace took me to the bookstore. The cross was a birthday gift from my parents, and I hardly ever took it off. It felt comfortable to wear on a daily basis. When I forgot, I felt empty.

Clutching the cross, I sent a silent prayer to God, asking for some forgiveness and understanding for leaving the house.

When I finally arrived at the bookstore, it was ten fifteen. I didn't worry about anyone seeing me there so late. I was a regular.

I headed straight to the teen fiction section. The object of my desire was fantasy. I had always loved the genre because it was easy to let the books take me to another world, a world where I wasn't a freak. I was just the reader watching the story unfold.

My favorite books were about fairies, and the ones that told of a Realm far away from our own world. The Realms contained beauty, wonder, magic, and mystery. Those tales intrigued me. I had loved fairies since my earliest childhood. When Dina and I were younger, my mother would tell us stories of fairies who sang in the forests. She would also say if anything was ever missing, the fairies took it. It was up to them whether they would return it or not. Mom taught Dina and me to thank the fairies every time we found something we thought we had lost.

As the years went by, my passion for fantasy grew, while Dina's dwindled. None of her friends believed, so her interests changed to boys and T.V. I kept my fascination, and I wasn't ashamed, no matter how childish it sounded. My belief in fairies had

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never left me, though deep down, I knew it was not likely they really existed. Even so, I liked the mystery and magic of believing in something I couldn't see.

It was easy to find something to read after scanning the shelves for a few moments; the store always came through for me. I soon had two books in my hands, just enough to get me through the week. Final exams at school were starting, so I wouldn't have much time to read between studying.

On the way to the checkout counter, a large, leather-bound book caught my eye. I was a sucker for antiques, so I stopped and touched my fingertips to the soft, worn cover, tracing the words thoughtfully. The book was brown, with green swirls making a border around the front and title. The title read, *The Mysterious Guide to Fantasy*. I had read other guides to mystical beings; usually, they were filled with random childish fluff that didn't make any sense. I always looked for books that made me think, and most importantly, transported me from the struggle of everyday life and allowed me to dream of something different.

For some reason, this book intrigued me. I knew I had to buy it the moment I saw it. Something about the book *drew* me to it. I had no idea what the reason could be, other than that it was so eye-catching, but I didn't think about it for very long. Always trying to be the smart shopper, I looked at the back for the price. I gasped. \$42.50! *No way!*

This book had better be good, was all I could think. On impulse, I grabbed the book and almost ran to the checkout before I could change my mind.

When I said I was a regular, I meant it. I knew practically every inch of the store and every employee. Therefore, I was a little shocked when I saw who was behind the counter. I had never seen her at the store before, and she didn't look like the kind of girl who would even work at a bookstore.

The girl was strikingly beautiful with skin as pale as mine. Her white-blonde hair ran thinly down to her waist, and her forest green eyes flickered with surprise when she saw me. I almost dropped the books I was holding. This girl was almost my reflection. Not exactly

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looking into a mirror, but it was very close. She was taller than I was, and her eyes were not the same shade of green, but it still shook me. I had never seen anyone who looked so much like me before.

“Did you find everything all right?” she asked.

As I was groping for words, my mind suddenly clouded and unclear, I quickly nodded my head. I curiously looked at her nametag to see if maybe I had seen her before. *Addison*. The name wasn't familiar to me, so I decided she was probably a new employee.

She started scanning the books. When she got to the crazily expensive one, her eyes widened, and for a second they seemed to shine brighter than before. She met my gaze as if she was trying to communicate some unspoken message, but I didn't understand what it was. This night had started to get weird, even for me, the poster child for strange.

“Interesting choice,” Addison remarked, holding up the book.

“Oh, I, uh, it just popped out at me,” I stammered.

I couldn't believe how stupid I was acting, and it must have been obvious to her how much of an effect seeing her was having on me. *How embarrassing*.

“It's a good read.”

“You've read it?” I asked.

“Yes, it's nicely written. Everything in it is true....Well, *almost* everything.”

Did she just say almost everything in a *fantasy* book was true? Noticing the confused look on my face, she quickly averted my gaze and looked down at the counter. I could tell she was feeling self-conscious. *Poor girl*, I thought.

“I hope it's good,” I said, trying to change the subject. “This is probably the most expensive book I've ever bought.”

“The total comes to \$62.35. How long have you been interested in fantasy?” she asked. Apparently, she still wanted to chat.

I handed her my debit card. “Forever, I guess. I've never thought about it. It's just always been my go-to genre. Plus, it has

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everything you would want in a book: adventure, mystery, romance, and sometimes even a little bit of comic relief.”

“Interesting...,” Addison mumbled.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing. Enjoy your reading,” she said.

She waited for me to depart. I grabbed my bag and headed for the exit, but paused at the door. “Are you new here? I’m kind of a regular, and I’ve never seen you before.”

Addison looked over and grinned. “You are very observant.”

It was all she would say.

I sighed and left. The girl had acted a bit odd, and thinking of her appearance still unsettled me. However, there was no use in spending the whole night talking to strangers. I couldn’t rely on the hope that my parents would never wake up and notice my absence. I checked my cell phone; the time was eleven fifteen. The store closed at eleven.

Why hadn’t Addison told me to hurry up and go?

As I walked home from the bookstore – the now heavy rain pouring over my hood and soaking my clothes – I couldn’t get my mind off the checkout girl, Addison. Something about meeting her had really gotten to me, and I couldn’t think of what it was.

Lost in thought, it took me a long time to react to the long tendril of water, like a snake, that shot out from under the railing of the bridge I was crossing. It wrapped itself around my ankle. With a jolt, it pulled me to the wooden surface, my head smacking against the planks, my palms and knees scraping along the rough wood. My bag of books hit the floor and slid out of my grasp. Crying out, I struggled to get up, but the water was stronger than I could imagine.

I couldn’t make sense of what was happening, and I didn’t really try. The water wrapped around my ankle was icy and cold, and strong enough to pull me right off the bridge. Paralyzed with fear, I couldn’t even utter a sound, let alone scream, as I fell. The rain was still pouring, the wind whipping at my face, my heart

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thumping violently in my chest. *Oh God, oh God, please don't let me die*, I prayed.

I hit the water. The force sent a wave of shock and electrifying pain through me, and for a moment, I could do nothing but take in the incredible agony. The freezing water caused my joints to stiffen. I could barely move.

Then my mind began to focus. I had to fight. I had to get out of here. Thrashing wildly to get to the surface, I struggled to hold my breath and stay alive. My whole body felt weighted down; I couldn't break the surface of the water. The coil of water was still around my ankle, pulling me into the depths of the small lake. Swallowing water, I coughed and spurted until my breath gave out. I was drowning, unable to understand how this could be happening.

I gasped as I swallowed more water; my throat was burning fiercely. Even if I could reach the surface, I wouldn't be able to scream. I knew no sound would come. What would I be able to do then anyway? Swim to shore? What shore? I didn't know where I was, and even if I *was* near a shore, I wasn't sure I had enough will power to swim.

My feet suddenly touched a smooth dirt surface. My first thought was that I had finally landed at the bottom of the lake. But then I realized I was being lifted. I hadn't reached the bottom. A layer of earth had suddenly appeared under my feet, lifting me up toward the surface. I didn't know how to explain what was happening, but I was grateful.

As I began to lose consciousness, I thought about how warm the earthy mud felt between my toes....

As I came to, my mind was crowded with thoughts of water and dirt, lots of dirt. I felt covered in it, soaking wet with mud. Every limb felt heavy and sore. My throat was dry and scratchy. My eyes stung. I wanted to open them to see where I was, but I was afraid the action would bring more pain.

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It wasn't easy to do – what with the burning sensation in my throat – but I was able to breathe. I was alive. Where was I? What had happened to me?

I decided to take the risk and open my eyes. I was back on the bridge, lying on my back in the middle of the road. It was late, but there was still the chance someone could be driving home.

But I couldn't get up. There was no way. I was tired, terribly cold, and defeated. The dirt beneath me was warm, but the gusts of wind chilled the rest of me to the bone. I was shivering and my teeth were chattering. This was the only sound I heard besides my ragged breathing... nothing else.

Not knowing what to do, or even how to begin to move any farther, I closed my eyes and waited. I didn't know what I was waiting for, but there was nothing else I could do.

I simply waited.

The water came back. The tendril once again coiled around my ankle. It was happening again. Feeling completely overwhelmed, this time I didn't even struggle. I didn't fight. I let the water take me. I had nothing left to give. I had nothing left to do. I lay there as the water dragged me nearer and nearer, closer and closer, to the edge of the bridge – massive déjà vu.

“No!” I heard someone shout.

The voice was deep, but I didn't see anyone. I didn't care. I was about to drown anyway. It didn't matter. I had already given up.

God, I'm sorry, I prayed. I just can't hold on any longer.

I was slipping. I could feel it. I would fall over the bridge again, and this time no miraculous pile of dirt would lift me to the surface.

But then I realized that it was taking an incredibly long time for me to fall. I was puzzled. It was funny how my only concern at this point was why it was taking me so long to drop into the water.

I lifted my neck slightly to observe what was happening. Immediately I figured out what the problem was...for the water, I mean. Someone was stopping it from taking me. I guessed it was the

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same someone I had heard shouting. Catching my interest, I put my hands on the ground to stop myself from being dragged any farther by the water. I wanted to see what would happen next.

He was lithe and agile as he moved around me, trying to prevent the water from taking me into the lake once more. It was tricky to notice his exact movements. He was fast, and I was still dizzy and weak...but I did notice one thing.

This man was creating dirt with his very hands, right out of thin air, and he was using the soil to expel the water. I watched vaguely as he created pile upon pile of dirt, but holding back a little in doing so, as if he was afraid to touch the water himself. The mud seemed to be working, though, because it was slowing down the attack and prolonging my safety, but I knew it would take more than that to stop the water completely.

He tried a different tactic. He made another pile of mud and added a few rocks, which he had also created himself. Who was this person? Was I hallucinating, or was this for real? How could it be? I remembered how I had thought Addison was strange. The thought almost made me laugh because of what was going on now. *This* was strange. Addison was nothing compared to this.

Finally, the man created a huge boulder by spreading his hands wide, the rock forming quickly before my eyes. Then he dropped it on the coil of water. The boulder just missed hitting my ankle and smashing my foot to millions of pieces. I stopped moving. The water stopped tugging. Everything was quiet and peaceful.

I breathed a hoarse sigh of relief and threw my hands over my eyes, trying to calm myself down. My heart was racing from a mixture of shock and adrenaline. I still had no idea what had just happened, how it had happened, or who had worked so hard to save me...but at least I was alive.

I made no attempt to move. I wasn't sure of my legs, or how it would feel to stand, so I didn't try.

The man was before me in an instant, his dark, earthy brown eyes staring down at me. Even in the dark, I could see them clearly. He held out his hand to me. Silently, I placed my hand in his and

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allowed him to pull me up. I owed him my gratitude. He had saved my life, no matter how strange it all seemed.

He was tall, lean, and muscular, with messy dark brown hair, wet from the pouring rain that must have ended while I was unconscious.

When I was on my feet and standing on my own, I waited for the mystery man to say the first words. Unsure of my voice, I didn't speak. I wondered if he would explain himself. I wondered what he would say, if he would tell me the truth or not.

"Are you all right?" he asked, his eyes starting at my toes and ending at my eyes, looking me over to make sure there was no permanent damage. At least not damage that he could see. On the inside, I was freaking out. But he wasn't looking for what was going on with me beneath the surface.

"Yes...I think so," I rasped. I cleared my throat. "But I'm a little sore, a little dizzy, and *very* confused."

"You have a right to be," he replied simply.

"Yeah...."

He didn't say anything else.

"So you aren't going to tell me what just happened?" I deduced. The fact was clearly readable across his face.

He looked me over again and sighed. "Just be careful in the future," he said.

"What's that supposed to mean? How can I be careful when I have no idea why this just happened? Water grabbed me!" I cried, gesturing with my hands toward the side of the bridge where I once lay. "How is that possible?"

When he didn't respond to my questions, I probed him further, trying to get him to answer me. "What about you, with the mud and the rock and the crazy out-of-thin-air thing? What *was* that?" I demanded to know.

"It was saving your life," he said, a hint of petulance creeping into his tone. "Be careful in the future, Ramsey."

Then he took off running, and after a few seconds, he was gone from my sight.

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Exhaustion sped through my body as I walked home. For once, I was not wide awake in the wee hours. I guess my fight against drowning and unseen forces had sapped my energy.

Who was that man back at the bridge? Why had he saved me, and how had he managed to do so? What was he? Why did he leave so quickly with no explanation? Most importantly, how did he know my name?

They were all questions I could not *begin* to answer.

I limped up the stairs to my bedroom, careful not to make any noise, and fell onto my bed, clutching the bag of books in my hand. I had picked them up before heading home from the bridge. *I'm not going to let a near-death experience take away sixty bucks*, I thought sarcastically to myself. Making jokes was the only way I could avoid thinking about the strangeness of the evening.

I was still soaking wet and muddy. I realized how bad it would be if my parents were to walk in here at this moment, or even my sister. I couldn't just stay like this.

Making as little sound as possible, I stripped from my clothes and soaked them in the sink while I towel dried and scrubbed the mud and water from my skin and hair. I changed into new pajamas and plopped the pile of wet clothes in the hamper, making sure to fit them in amongst the outfit I wore today so it would be harder for my parents to notice them later. I moved slowly as I did all of this in an effort to end the throbbing in my head and the aching of my throat and joints.

Even though I was exhausted, I wanted to read. Reading always helped to calm me down. After everything that had happened, I felt a huge need to let my eyes run through the words on a page or two. Like if I didn't, I would be missing out on something terribly important.

I had made up my mind.

I emptied the books onto my bed and threw the dirty, wet plastic bag into the trash. Curiously, none of the books was wet or

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damaged, and I was extremely thankful. I was lucky not to have lost them in the water, *very lucky*.

I carefully put away two of the books on my shelf, keeping the expensive one. I felt a strong, almost eerie, compulsion to read it.

I sat in bed and opened the volume. I immediately noticed an inscription at the top of the table of contents:

Turn to page two hundred and seventy-three. Then you will understand.

-A

I gasped. Could “A” possibly stand for Addison the checkout girl? It had to be. No other explanation seemed reasonable to me at the time. I was about to turn to the page, when there was a soft knock on the door. Startled, I dropped the heavy book, which landed with a *thud* beside my bed.

I wasn’t so good with surprises. My reactions were always dramatic.

Mom opened the door and stepped into the room. I quickly reached down and pushed the book under my bed.

“Honey, are you still up? It’s two in the morning!” Mom whispered.

“I couldn’t sleep, but I think I’m tired now. Goodnight, Mom.” I was anxious to get to that page.

Instead of leaving, she came and sat on the bed with me. *Great*, I thought.

“I’m worried about you, Ramsey,” she told me.

“You shouldn’t be,” I replied, too hastily, though, because she sighed and shook her head.

“I don’t know about that. You seem very...*distant* lately.”

Putting emphasis on the “distant” hadn’t made it any easier to hear. Truthfully, I guess I was somewhat distant. Feeling like an outsider didn’t exactly make me want to be buddy-buddy with everyone, even the parents I loved. And especially now, I *wanted* to be distant. I’d had a close call back at that bridge. I was in no mood to chat with my mother.

Markelle Grabo

“Sorry, Mom, it’s finals. I’m stressed about studying,” I lied, clearing my throat to make sure she wouldn’t notice how raspy my voice sounded.

I wasn’t going to bring up the subject of being “different” from dinner. And I had no intention of telling my mother about the frightening bridge experience. I wanted to keep that to myself, along with the water and magical Earth Man. If I blabbed the story now, my mother would probably think I was insane. Anyway, telling her would also be giving away the fact that I snuck out at night. That wouldn’t go over well with either her or my father.

So, yes, I would keep this event to myself for now. It was my own bit of fantasy.

“I’m sure you’ll do fine,” she said, bringing me back to reality with the sound of her gentle voice. “You always do. Have you thought about what you want to do for your birthday? June seventh is only a few weeks away.”

“I’ll let you know soon, Mom. I promise.”

“All right, now get some sleep. Mondays come too soon.”

“They sure do. Good night,” I said.

She stopped at the door and turned back. “I love you,” she whispered.

“Love you, too,” I whispered back.

Instead of getting out of bed for the book, I forgot all about it and fell asleep. Before I knew it, morning had come.