

misfits inc.
no. 4

the
kingfisher's
tale

mark
delaney

For Gilda
My first kiss.
My first love.
My John Denver friend.
Twenty-seven years ago,
and I remember every moment.



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prologue

Las Cruzas National Forest
Three years ago

Jerry Vitale worried about the kid. He hadn't yet recovered from the last few weeks. "Hey," he said, "how 'bout helping me over here?"

The kid threw a single, quick nod in Jerry's general direction, then walked toward him, chainsaw resting almost weightless on his right shoulder.

"Let's start with this one," Jerry said. "You take it. I'll...supervise."

Rolling up the sleeves of his flannel shirt past his forearms, Jerry gazed out over the work site. Most of the men, the old-timers especially, were working again with an air of carefree abandon, as though the last two weeks had never happened. Jerry nodded with approval. At least until the next battle, their work would continue without interruption, without negative publicity, without danger. The foolishness was over.

He gestured to the kid. *Go ahead.*

But the kid had not recovered as the old-timers had. The older lumberjacks had dealt with fanatical environmentalists—monkey-wrenchers—before. So when they had awakened about a week ago to discover the vandalism—fuel for the vehicles and the chainsaws stolen, gas lines in the heavy movers cut, fuel tanks contaminated with granulated sugar—they had been angry, but not surprised. A day later, when the papers broke the news of the vandalism, the work site teemed with anchormen from the evening news stations, protestors carrying placards and shouting through bullhorns, and some nut who lived atop a Scotch pine for three days until a judge ordered him down. Now the circus was over. Jerry had beaten them all through his quiet insistence that his company be allowed to harvest lumber when and where the law allowed. “Careful,” said Jerry, “so it doesn’t jump out of your hand when you start it.”

The kid nodded and reached for the pull rope on the chainsaw.

The kid—Tim Breen was his name—was only nineteen and had joined Monarch Lumber a month or so ago. He was a little young for the job, Jerry knew, and completely lacking in experience, but physically he was a horse. The company always had a need for a strong back, and the old-timers like Eli wouldn’t hold out forever. Best of all, Tim was easygoing, willing to learn, and eager to work hard. Even the veterans, as tough and wary as they were, would throw an arm across Tim’s shoulder or smack him on the back when they told a joke. It was a warmth they didn’t share with just anybody.

“Well—go on,” said Jerry.

Tim gave the rope a firm tug, and the chainsaw roared to life.

“I hold it like this?” Tim hollered.

Jerry nodded. The kid knew how to handle a chainsaw—Jerry had certainly shown him enough times. It was just that after the monkey-wrenchers Tim had become a little skittish. Jerry knew he’d have to baby him for a couple more days.

He watched as Tim approached the tree and positioned the blade for the initial wedge cut. “Look what you’re doing,” Jerry shouted over the din. “If you cut there, what’s the angle of the fall?”

The kid looked at him, then at the tree trunk, then at the space where, in a few minutes, the sixty-foot Douglas fir would strike the ground. In the path of its fall were two other trees. The fir could easily strike one, glance off it, and roll. Too unpredictable. Too dangerous.

Swallowing, Tim shifted a quarter turn around the trunk. “Maybe here would be better,” he called.

Jerry nodded. “Maybe.”

Tim once more laid the spinning chain against the base of the tree. It bit into the bark and sent up a fountain of sawdust. As the young man worked, Jerry watched, his calm presence seeming to give Tim a bit more confidence.

From behind him, Jerry heard a voice shouting his name. He turned to see Zachary Morgan, his partner at Monarch, striding toward him. Zach was gesturing at one of the trucks, his face a hard mask of anger. *Probably*

4 another repair problem, Jerry thought. *Leftover monkey-wrenching*. Sometimes it took a while to uncover all the damage.

Just as he turned to follow Zach, his ear caught an odd whine from the chainsaw. Jerry looked over his shoulder and saw the kid wrestling with the saw, his brow furrowed and his massive arms shuddering with the effort. The kid drew the saw back an inch or so, then pressed forward again. Jerry sensed the danger instantly. He raised his hand and shouted to Tim, but against the buzz of the chainsaw the young man could not hear him. Grimacing, Tim used all his strength to drive its blade into the soft wood.

Jerry heard a metallic *pwing*.

Like a striking snake, the rotating, bladed chain snapped and whipped out from the saw, lashing Tim across the neck and torso. The young man stumbled back a couple of steps, the saw dropping from his fingers and thudding against the forest floor. In the sudden silence, he gazed open-mouthed at the blood welling through the front of his torn shirt.

He stood, teetering like a cut tree before falling to the ground.

Jerry and Zach ran over to the kid. Jerry tore off Tim's shirt and examined the wound that ran from the kid's neck, across his chest, and along his stomach. Blood was everywhere; it was hard to see where all of it was coming from. Jerry pressed the kid's shirt as best he could against the wound, but there was too much damage, too

much blood. Beneath him, the kid heaved and shook. Men came running over, stripping off their shirts for bandages. One of them grabbed the satellite phone and called for medical assistance.

Zach gazed at the tree. "Jerry..." he said. He pointed at the trunk where Tim had been cutting. Within the wood, glistening like the edge of a honed knife and made ragged by the saw's blade, was a length of steel.

Spiked! Monkey-wrenchers sometimes drove a steel spike into a tree to prevent the tree from being cut. The spike was invisible to loggers, and harmless to the tree, but deadly to a spinning chainsaw blade.

Jerry pressed harder on his makeshift bandage. The damage to Tim's neck was the worst. Jerry gave up trying to control the bleeding from the kid's chest, letting the others do what they could. Instead, he pressed the saturated shirt hard against the neck wound with both hands. The kid gazed up at him, his eyes wide and unfocused, his mouth opening and closing as though he were trying to form words.

"Don't talk," said Jerry.

The man holding the satellite phone waved his arm for Jerry's attention. "Medical team's on the way," he called.

An ambulance will never make it in time, thought Jerry.

Zach looked at him, as though overhearing the thought. "They won't send an ambulance through on the logging road," he said. "They'll send a chopper. He'll make it."

Jerry looked at the kid. Tim's eyes were blank and unseeing now. The young man tried once more to form

6 words, his mouth shaking in an odd, twisted pattern. Jerry shook his head. *No...no...*

Tim's body heaved once more. His eyes opened wide for a moment, stared deeply into Jerry's, then turned glassy. Jerry heard a deep breath escape from the kid, felt it brush the hairs of his forearm. Then Tim Breen's body relaxed completely, sagging to the ground.

"Come on," Jerry said between his clenched teeth. He gripped Tim's shoulders and gave them a gentle shake. "Come on!" He slapped Tim's cheek, but the eyes—the kid's eyes told him.

Too late.

Jerry continued to press the shirt into the wound. He looked at Zach, but his partner did not return the gaze. Instead, Zach stood quietly next to the spiked tree that had ended Tim's life. His hand reached out for one of the axes the men used to clear away smaller branches or to split logs for a fire. He gripped the ax with one hand and swung it around, allowing the blade to bite into the side of the tree.

As Jerry watched, Zach pulled the blade out and swung it again fiercely. His partner's motions seemed oddly machinelike. Again and again Zach yanked the blade from the tree and drove it in again, cleaving small chunks of wood with each swing, as though by hand, and by himself, he would tear the tree from the ground.

chapter one

Sunday

Eugenia “Byte” Salzmänn pedaled her bicycle up the steep incline. “Hurry! We’re almost there,” she shouted to her friends. The bike’s soft, knobby tires bit into the trail, sending out a small fountain of dirt as Byte squeezed the brakes and skidded into a turn.

She looked over her shoulder and laughed. Her friends—Peter Braddock, Jake Armstrong, and Mattie Ramiro—clustered together on their own bikes perhaps thirty yards behind her, struggling. Each had risen off the seat of his bike and was leaning forward against the handlebars, bearing down against the slippery dirt. Byte wasn’t even breathing hard.

She had to admit she had an unfair advantage on a dirt trail. Her bike was a Diamondback, a twenty-one-speed mountain climber that was geared so low Byte felt she could almost ride it up the side of a building. She took it now to the peak of the incline, hung there a moment, and cast another glance back at her friends. Then she

8 shifted her weight forward and let the bike tilt into a final downward plunge. This was her favorite part of the ride. Here, the trail straightened, and she could feel herself picking up speed. The wind was cold against her face and made her eyes water. It tossed her hair and whistled through the vents of her riding helmet.

This part of the trail cut through several hundred acres of federally owned national forest. On either side of Byte were towering pine trees, thick with spring growth. Their needles glistened with moisture, dripping with the misty rain that had fallen only an hour ago.

Her destination was a clearing that lay just ahead. Byte squeezed the brakes and swung one leg over the silicone-filled seat, coasting the last few yards and jumping off as the bike slowed. Like many climbing bikes, hers was designed to be as lightweight as possible, so it had no kickstand. Byte leaned the bicycle against a tree and sat down in the clearing, slipping off her backpack and drawing in deep gulps of air. She tugged off her shoes and socks, digging her toes into the wet grass. Peter, Jake, and Mattie crested the hill, and Byte watched as their bikes bucked and shuddered beneath them, bouncing against the rocks and gouges in the trail.

“Hey,” she said as the others pulled into the clearing, “we made it.”

None of the guys said a word. Jake Armstrong swung off his bike and stamped down the kickstand with his foot. He sank onto the dirt, his back against a tree, his eyes closed, his face tilted up to the sky. Byte smiled. She

liked the way that Jake sometimes tuned out his surroundings and turned his mind inward. Byte knew he wasn't tired; Jake was the most athletic one in the group. He was probably feeling the sun and the cool breeze, drawing in the overpowering scent of pine in the air. Maybe he was even turning those sensations into a daydream, or fashioning them into a line of music.

Peter Braddock looked around the clearing through fogged glasses. Byte sensed he was mentally cataloguing the sights, sounds, and smells of the area, filing them away in that data disk of a brain. Two hours after they left this place, Peter would no doubt be able to describe every rock, insect, and plant within a twenty-foot radius.

It was Mattie Ramiro who seemed to have the most limited appreciation of the trip. Oblivious to the scenery, he turned his attention to Byte's bike, fingering the cables in the expensive Shimano derailleur system. "Hey," he asked, "how does this work?" He tugged at one of the shifters, and it clicked.

"Don't do that," Byte said.

Mattie shrugged, grinned, and sprawled out on the grass.

These were Byte's friends. The four had met early in high school, and Peter had named their group Misfits, Inc.

"So," Jake finally said, "this is it, huh?"

Byte wrapped her arms around her knees and took in a deep, satisfied breath. "Uh huh," she said. "This is it."

Peter leaned over and consulted the odometer on his bicycle. “We’re exactly 4.7 miles from your mom’s cabin,” he noted. “What do you do here? I mean, it’s a long way to ride just for the view.”

Byte hesitated. Peter was so logical, so focused on precise detail. How could she make him understand that her love for this place was not based in logic, but emotion? Would Peter understand how, when she and her mom spent a weekend at their mountain cabin, Byte would cycle to this spot and rest against her special tree—the very one Jake was leaning against—until the sun began to fall? Could he comprehend the thrill she felt in summer when the clouds caught the sunset and streaked the sky above the dark trees with reds and oranges and purples? Or in winter when the pines were heavy with snow, and the wind blew the flakes off in thin, shimmering curtains? How could she make him understand that, in spring, a nearby stream swelled with meltwater, its quiet trickle becoming a gurgling rush, and that she found tremendous peace in that sound?

Byte often came here after difficult times at home or at school and rested, first crying, then laughing, then crying again until her insides felt clean.

“I just come here to think,” she finally said. “To be alone.”

Mattie plucked a strand of sourgrass from the dirt and stuck it in his mouth. “Cool,” he said.

For several moments the four of them sat quietly, listening to the chatter of birds. Byte watched her friends,

realizing that she had invited them out here specifically because she wanted to finally share this place with them. But one important part of the experience remained unexplored.

“Hey,” she said quietly, slipping her shoes back on, “I want to show you guys something.”

She rose, and the three boys followed her away from the path and deeper into the woods. She stepped through the grass and leafy plants that grew on the forest floor, leading them toward the sound of rushing water.

The stream was about twelve feet wide and probably a little over a foot deep. Its clear water bubbled over the stones that lined the bottom. Byte pointed here and there, showing the others some tiny fish swept along by the water’s current. “Once all the snow melts,” she said, “this stream will be half again as wide, and the water will come up to my knees.” She squatted down and motioned to the others to do the same. “If we’re really quiet,” she whispered, “we might get to see something.”

They waited silently for several minutes. Mattie, the youngest of the group, grew impatient and began tugging at a loose piece of bark on a tree. Byte scowled at him and shook her head. Next to her, Peter waited, looking at Byte with a raised eyebrow and a hint of a smile on his face. Byte figured he was enjoying the air of mystery she had created. Jake just shrugged and leaned toward a dandelion, blowing off its ball of cottony seeds.

Byte heard a birdcall and stared toward the upper branches of a tree. Something moved, and she pointed so the others could see it. "Look," she whispered.

In the tree was a large gray bird, about the size of an average pet-store parrot. It had a crest of bright red feathers along the top of its head, and a long, thin, needlelike beak that turned downward at the end. It sat up on its branch and called again.

Then it did something that delighted Byte and surprised the three boys. It dove down from the top of the tree, its wings half folded for speed, and shot toward the stream. Water splashed, wings fluttered, then the bird rose from the stream and glided back to its perch. Now a tiny fish squirmed in its beak. The bird made several jerking motions with its head and the fish slid down its gullet. The bird ruffled its feathers, spraying the water from them, and settled down again on the branch.

"That was amazing," whispered Jake.

"I looked up the bird in an Audubon field guide," said Byte. "It's a belted kingfisher. The females dig trenches next to streambeds and lay their eggs inside them." She looked at the others. "Come on," she said. "A little ways upstream, there's a small waterfall I want to show you."

She led them along the edge of the stream and up a small incline. The leafy plants tugged at their ankles and the moist earth was slippery, so they climbed by planting their feet against tree roots and small stones.

It was easy for Byte to lose herself in this place. Nature did for Byte what music did for Jake, what mastering a

difficult sleight-of-hand magic trick did for Mattie, what a chess problem did for Peter. Even now as she watched, a gray squirrel chattered nearby, and Byte saw it scurry up a tree and out along a branch. As the branch thinned, it gave under the squirrel's weight, bent toward the ground, then whipped upward, catapulting the squirrel into a neighboring tree. Byte wanted to show her friends how clever the squirrel had been, but the moment was gone. "Byte?" called a voice.

Lost in her thoughts, Byte was barely conscious of the sound. The faint echo seemed miles away.

"Byte!" The voice broke through. It was Mattie.

Byte stopped and turned, surprised to see that she was ten yards ahead of the others. Mattie was bent on one knee, his hand pressed against a tree trunk for balance. He reached down with his other hand and scooped up something from the grass.

"Look," he said. One of the birds, a belted kingfisher, rested limply in his open palm. "It's dead."

Byte ran over to him. She, Jake, and Peter gathered around Mattie to peer at the dead bird.

"It hasn't been dead very long," said Peter. "Bugs haven't gotten to it yet." He prodded it with his finger, turning it over for further inspection. "There's no obvious sign of injury. It must have been sick, or maybe it was just old."

"That's sad," said Byte. She lifted up the bird's limp wing, examined it, then sighed as she smoothed it back into place.

“Come over here,” Peter called. He had wandered a few yards into the woods. Just as Mattie had, he was kneeling on one knee and staring at the ground.

“What is it?” asked Jake.

Peter looked up, and Byte felt an odd chill when his gaze turned in her direction.

“This is weird,” he said. “Here’s two more of them. Both dead.”



“This doesn’t make sense,” said Byte, standing next to Peter and staring at the feathered corpses lying in the dirt. “What could be killing them?”

“Maybe it’s just a coincidence,” said Mattie. “I mean, everything dies.”

Peter shook his head. “That’s true, but these birds all died recently, and none of them appears to have been injured by predators. That doesn’t seem like much of a coincidence.”

He slipped his backpack off his shoulders and unzipped it. Byte stared as he pulled out his lunch, slipped a sandwich from its plastic bag, and wrapped it in a paper towel. Using another paper towel he picked up one of the dead birds, placed it in the bag, and squeezed the zipper closed. Watching him, Byte thought of old Frankenstein movies: Peter as the hunchback Igor digging for dead body parts.

Peter paused in his work and looked up at Byte and the others. His hand froze just as he was slipping the wrapped

bird corpse into his backpack. Mattie, Byte noticed, had a pinched expression on his face as he eyed Peter's sandwich, the dead bird, the sandwich, the dead bird.

Peter hesitated, catching Mattie's look. "I just want to find out what's killing them," Peter said, as though gathering up dead birds were a common hobby. "Don't you?"

"You know, Peter," said Jake, "you're right. In fact, I was just thinking about that dead raccoon we saw on the side of the road on the way up here. The one with the tire track on it? I think we should call the county coroner's office and—"

Byte swatted Jake's shoulder. "*Jake*," she said, laughing. "Enough."

Mattie folded his arms accusingly and glared at Peter. "You did that so I wouldn't scrounge off your lunch, didn't you?"

For several moments everyone remained silent, waiting for Peter to complete his task. Then—maybe it was the way the shadows shifted, or the way the breeze swept across her—Byte realized suddenly that Jake was moving away from them, canting his head at an odd angle as though trying to hear something. Byte watched, but soon she could barely see him through the foliage. His figure became a shadow, dappled by the sunlight that streamed through the trees. Curious, she went after him. Peter and Mattie followed, tree branches and dead leaves crackling under their feet. As they approached Jake, he put his finger to his lips. "Listen," he said. "Do you hear that?"

Byte held her breath. She heard birdcalls, the trickle of the stream, the rustle of wind in the trees, even the distant wail of a coyote. Then she heard what Jake had heard—a crackling sound from her left, the brush of something against low foliage behind her, and, from the thick grouping of trees just ahead, the crunch of dirt under foot.

“Mule deer?” she whispered. The species was common in these woods.

“That close?” asked Jake. “I don’t think so. They’d know we were here by now, and they would have taken off.”

Byte caught a flash of color just ahead. A man stepped out from between two trees. He had deep-set eyes and a wispy white beard that trailed along a narrow chin. His skinny legs looked strangely out of place below his thick, muscled chest and shoulders. Another man—perhaps fifty, tall, with hard features and a thin, muscular frame—also stepped into view. He was wearing a red flannel shirt, dirty blue jeans, and grimy leather work gloves.

“What are you kids doing here?” the tall man thundered.

Before anyone could answer, more men crunched through the brush and into view. They seemed to come from everywhere—from ahead of the Misfits, from behind, from either side—perhaps a dozen in all. Each was tall and burly, heavily muscled in the arms and shoulders. The men glared at the four teenagers. One of them carried an ax. Carelessly, as though he were kicking a bit of mud off his shoe, he set the bladed head of

the ax against the ground and braced his boot heel against it. Then he yanked upward on the handle so that the head popped off and fell in the dirt.

The forest went silent. Byte no longer heard the bird-calls or the trickle of the stream behind her. All she heard was a rhythmic slapping sound as the man raised up that ax handle and brought it down against his palm, again and again and again.



“I asked you kids a question,” said the tall man. “What do you think you’re doing here?”

“We—we were just hiking,” stammered Peter. “Is there a problem?”

“You’re not allowed off the trail,” said the man. “You know that. There are signs all over the campground.”

You’re off the trail too, thought Byte, but she kept silent. The wall of men was suffocating.

“You kids stay on the trail and away from the woods,” said the man with the beard. “You hear me? Now get out of here, or there’ll be real trouble.”

Some of the men looked at one another as though uncertain what to do next. A few stepped aside, leaving an opening in the circle through which the Misfits could leave. The four teens moved slowly toward that opening, glancing at one another, searching for any sign of understanding in the others’ faces.

“Wait a minute!” roared the tall man. “Hold on!” The circle closed again like a cage door. “Before we let them

18 go, I want to know who these kids are and what they're doing here."

The bearded man hesitated. "Zach, don't you think—" "Shut up!"

Since Peter had been the one to speak before, the man called Zach turned to him now. "I want to see your IDs," he said. He then glared at Byte, Jake, and Mattie. "All of you. Now. Get 'em out."

The three glanced toward Peter, waiting to see what he would do. He was little help. He stood frozen, silent. But Byte could see in his eyes that his mind was working feverishly.

Zach gestured to a man standing behind Peter, who reached for Peter's backpack. He stripped it from Peter's shoulders and tugged at the zipper. When it was open, he peered inside and shook his head. "You were right, Zach," he said to the tall man. He reached inside and took out the lunch bag containing the dead bird. "Look." He tossed the bag into the tall man's waiting hands. Byte noticed that Zach narrowed his eyes. Seeing the bird had clearly changed something—or perhaps it only confirmed something he had already believed.

"Well," said Zach, "look at this. Just out for a little hike, eh?" He shook the bag open, and the dead bird fell into his palm. He flung it into the forest with a sidearm motion. At the same time, the empty bag caught the breeze and fluttered from his fingers, taking off like a kite after its string had broken.

Still rummaging through the pack, the man found Peter's wallet and flipped through the photo windows to

study Peter's driver's license and student ID card. A moment later Byte gasped as hands tore the fanny pack from around her waist. Another man locked an arm around Mattie to keep him from running and drew the wallet from Mattie's rear pocket. The man with the ax handle approached Jake.

Soon Zach was glancing through four sets of ID. "Peter Braddock, Byte Salzmann, Jake Armstrong, and Mattie Ramiro." He handed the wallets back as he slowly announced each name, his voice pealing like a bell. Zach nodded a command, and the circle of men spread open. "Get out of here," he said gruffly. "You won't like what'll happen if I see you here again."

The Misfits moved slowly back to the trail. Together they walked in silence toward the distant clearing where they had left their bicycles. Byte watched as Peter turned to glance at the men standing behind them. She stared at him questioningly: *Who were those men? What were they doing? Why did they threaten us?*

Peter shook his head and placed a finger to his lips. *Not now. We'll talk soon.*

The bright clarity of his eyes revealed everything. Peter, Byte knew, didn't have the answers yet, but he was working on them.



"So what was that all about?" Jake asked, tugging at the lock on his bicycle. In his anger he tugged a little too hard, and the vinyl-coated chain whipped through the bike spokes, scoring his knuckle. Mattie bent to yank

another strand of sourgrass from the dirt, then stuck it in his mouth, twirling it thoughtfully with his tongue. Byte sat against a tree—legs drawn up, head tilted downward, face hidden behind a mass of hair she combed forward with her fingers.

Peter stood away from the group. He leaned his weight against a tree trunk and stared down the trail, toward the place where, moments ago, the men had surrounded them. The forest sounds seemed distant and subdued—the rustle of wind through branches, the whispered ticking of pine needles blowing off and striking the earth, the faraway laughter of another group of hikers.

“Did you notice,” Peter said, as much to himself as to the others, “how dirty their clothes were? Their hands?”

Byte looked at him. “Hmm?”

“You don’t get your hands all greasy like that just from hiking. Those men must have been working, using some kind of machinery.”

Jake sucked on his scraped knuckle, then wiped it across the leg of his blue jeans. “It could have been pine sap. Could have been anything.”

“All over them like that?” asked Mattie. “They would have had to have been climbing the trees to get that dirty.” He drew the chewed stalk of sourgrass from his mouth and tossed it to the ground. “Look, so we meet some jerks in the woods. And we *were* off the trail. I say we forget about it. Are we going to let those guys ruin the rest of our day?”

Peter spun around and looked at the others. “No,” he said, “we’re not.” He swung his backpack up onto his

shoulder. “Mattie’s right. Let’s enjoy the rest of the day. But there’s one thing I want to do before we leave.” He started striding the way they had come, away from the group of men and toward the sun that was falling in the west.

Byte, Jake, and Mattie glanced at one another before following Peter. Byte in particular wondered what Peter had in mind, but she had long ago given up trying to second-guess her friend.

“It’s the birds,” he finally explained, the uphill walk forcing his breath from him in short bursts. “I thought it was strange...how that guy, the one they called Zach...got all bent out of shape...because of the dead bird in my pack. Why get upset about it? Why bother tossing it away?” Peter had walked so far ahead of his friends, Byte wondered if he knew they could barely hear him now. She watched as he slowed and began walking in a narrow circle just off the trail. “They were here, right?” Peter asked. “I mean, this is where we found them, isn’t it?”

Mattie ran ahead and joined Peter. A moment later, all four Misfits were pacing slowly around the clearing, heads down, eyes searching for the other dead birds they had found.

“Hey, look,” said Mattie. “Here’s where I found the first one.” He pointed to a spot on the ground. The earlier rain had muddied the soil, and there, like a fossil in ancient rock, was the light tracing of a bird’s shape.

Peter pointed toward some ground foliage. “The others were right over there,” he said. “I’m sure of it.”

Byte stood in the center of the clearing, her head turning first toward the impression in the ground, then in the direction in which Peter was pointing. Peter and Mattie were right, of course; Byte was certain.

The dead birds should have been right at the Misfits' feet, but they had vanished.



Thoughts of the birds stayed with Byte for the rest of the day and long into the evening. As the Misfits rode their bikes out of the woods, she saw transparent ghost-birds along the trail. Later, as she watched a video with her mom, her mind strayed from the images on the television screen. She saw a belted kingfisher splashing in a stream for fish, and another lying dead at the stream's edge.

Now the digital alarm clock on her bed table blinked red numerals at her, the hour approaching midnight. School tomorrow, she thought, lying in bed, blankets yanked to her chin, eyes fixed on the ceiling. In her mind she relived the day's events: a dead kingfisher lying in the mud, men with greasy fingers and dirty work pants, the slap of an ax handle against a man's palm, echoing. Byte shivered at the images and wrapped the blankets around her more snugly.

Something was happening out there in the woods.