



PROLOGUE

*O*nce, a village lounged on the morning side of the Blue Ridge Mountains, tucked into a valley in the lap of Bear Church Mountain. Then, panthers screamed from rocky outcroppings and wolves prowled. Now, the mountain shelters an ageless black bear, deer, foxes, and an ancient raven who knows more than he should.

Once, Native people stepped respectfully in soft moccasins, taking only what they needed from the mountain. Then other people sailed over the ocean and claimed ownership of the land. The first people were forced westward, leaving behind footprints of their stories.

Later, the raven brought news of hot fighting around the Blue Ridge. The Civil War stopped on the village's doorstep. Terrified horses trampled through the woods as the Union and Confederate armies clashed. A wounded soldier died by the trickling spring; juneberries he'd picked along the road spilled from his pocket. Seven trees grew from those berries, and folks declared the fruits from those trees were the sweetest in the state.

Morning glory vines, blue as the Virginia sky in June, spread, and the village came to be called Morning Glory. Later, the village bloomed with houses, businesses, even a factory.

Yet the land clung to its memories. At night, some in their beds swore they heard the jingle of harnesses and pounding hoofbeats. Others glimpsed shifting figures in the woods—there one eyeblink, gone the next. By true dawn, birds began singing and trees kept their secrets.

Decades passed. Hard times hit. The factory closed and people moved away. Only eight residents remained, three of them children.

Now one of the children, an eleven-year-old girl, gazed at the rusted metal sign planted at the head of

Main Street. The sign was shaped like a soft-drink bottle. Its painted letters had once spelled out *MORNING GLORY — HAPPY STARTS HERE*, but the paint had weathered and flaked, and now the sign read, *M R N I G G O R Y — H P P Y T A R T E R E*.


It's an incantation, the girl decided. Recite it three times and turn a lucky piece over in your pocket. It will bring happiness back here.

Not noticing the raven that cruised on thermal currents in the sky above her, she slid her hand into the pocket of her shorts. She didn't have a lucky penny, only an old Juneberry Blue bottle cap. It would have to do. "Morning Glory. Happy starts here!" The words felt odd in her mouth, yet the jagged ridges of the bottle cap were reassuring.

She looked down the road. No sign of her father's rig. No blast from his air horn saying he was back at last. Nothing had changed. With a sigh, she walked back home.

But she was wrong. Something had changed.

The raven circling overhead saw it first. His wide tail flared as he flew up Bear Church Mountain to report to the bear, the Master of the Mountain.



CHAPTER ONE

*A*ndie Jennings reached for her rabbit scissors. But the small scissors, which practically jumped into her hand because she relied on them so much, weren't on the red Formica tabletop. Had she left them on the lunch counter when she fetched the last two slices of custard pie for herself and Bunch? She glanced over at the counter. Menus stacked neatly, caddy cradling clean flatware, plant in vintage yellow pot, tray of ketchup bottles. No scissors.

Wait. Priscilla, the plant, looked too innocent.

“Not again.” To her little sister, Andie added, “Don't touch my pie. Or the Story Box.”

Andie slid out of the booth seat and stalked over to the window end of the counter. She'd left the scissors by the coffee urn, far enough away from the kleptomaniac morning glory. Or so she'd thought.

Sure enough, she spied a glint of silver beneath a huddle of heart-shaped leaves. Andie was in no mood. Pushing aside leaves and purple blossoms furled tight like fairy umbrellas, she yanked her scissors free from the grip of a hairy tendril. Dirt spattered the countertop.

"Leave my stuff alone!" she said, as if the morning glory had ears. She grabbed a spoon from the flatware caddy and stabbed it handle-first into the pot. "Take that instead!"

When she got back to the booth, she heard an emphatic clatter. The spoon lay on the floor.

"Just like a toddler," Bunch said. She had already polished off her pie. Their grandmother claimed Bunch ate like a registered hog—fast and expecting the very best.

Andie opened the cigar box on the table and snipped a stray fake leaf wanting to escape. Before she slipped the scissors into their faded velvet case, her thumb rubbed the half circle formed by the rabbit's tail. Its hind legs

stood on an oval handle and its front paws and head held the sharp blades. How such a marvelous thing had found its way into her grandmother's dresser seemed like magic.

NeeNee had set her straight when Andie asked about them. "Number one, you shouldn't snoop in other people's belongings. Number two, my grandmother Effie Woolwine won those scissors in a poker game. Her cards were bad that night, so she spread a handkerchief on her chair, sat on it, and her luck changed. And yes, you may have the scissors."

Andie ate the point of her pie first and made a wish. It was always the same wish, like the incantation she'd made earlier at the bottle sign. A futile wish.

Bunch tipped a sandwich bag of tiny, winged plastic ponies onto the table, each painted a gaudy color and no bigger than a baby toadstool.

"Put those away," Andie said. "I'm almost done."

"I'm still listening." Then Bunch gave Andie the smile that brought out her dimples. "Next time, will you build a Story Box for my ponies and make up a story about them?"

"My Story Boxes are about the stories Daddy used to tell me. This is my way of telling them to you."

Andie shoved her plate to the side, then opened the cigar box so the lid lay flat on the table. Bunch gazed at the scene inside, reaching out one finger to touch the tangle of artificial thorny red roses hot-glued onto the lid so they sprang upright when the box was opened.

“You made Sleeping Beauty,” she cooed with delight. “This is the enchanted hedge!”

Andie was pleased. The back of the Story Box featured her painting of distant moody castle towers against a moonlit sky. The castle was nearly obscured by the thicket of roses. Within the hedge, a paper bear lay sleeping. Her box was indeed a scene from “Sleeping Beauty.”

Andie closed her eyes briefly to enter storytelling mode, then began in a low voice. Bunch leaned forward to hear her better.

“Once,” Andie began, “a baby girl was born to a king and queen. They named her Elspeth-Rose—”

Bunch giggled at hearing Andie’s fairy-tale version of her own real name. Andie shot her a look. Bunch placed her elbows on the table and cupped her chin on her fists.

“The king threw a party. Everyone in the kingdom was invited, including the fairies. They all ate cake on

golden saucers. The fairies gave the baby presents like beauty and grace and being kind. Just then, the front door banged open! An ugly old fairy stood there.”

She imitated an old crone. “‘How dare you not invite me!’ The king and queen had forgotten about the old fairy, plus they didn’t have any more golden saucers. She went up to the baby. ‘Here is my present. On her fifteenth birthday, Elspeth-Rose will prick her finger on a spindle and fall over dead!’”

“What’s a spindle?” Bunch asked.

“Like a sort of needle, I guess. Then the youngest fairy gave the baby *her* present. ‘Instead of falling over dead, Elspeth-Rose will sleep for a hundred years.’ The king ordered all spindles in the kingdom to be destroyed so that would never happen.”

Andie took a sip of water. “On her fifteenth birthday, Elspeth-Rose found a secret room in the castle. Inside was an ugly old lady with a spindle. ‘Come closer,’ she said. Elspeth-Rose touched the spindle and instantly fell asleep. Everyone in the castle fell asleep, too, even the spiders. A hedge of roses grew around the castle. All the creatures in the forest were under the spell too. Everyone dreamed.”

Andie pointed to the paper bear. “The bear dreamed it had all the honey it wanted—”

“Hold on,” Bunch interrupted. “What about Elspeth-Rose? She’s supposed to be waiting for the prince to come wake her up. I don’t care about the stupid bear.”

Andie flicked the top of the cigar box. “Well, you *should*. Elspeth-Rose is just lying there. The bear’s dreams are much more exciting.”

“But the story is about *me*, the Princess of Morning Glory.”

It was true. Andie had been telling the stories that her father had once told her, using a version of the title Bunch had given herself, the Princess of Morning Glory, as the main character. Bunch, short for Honeybunch, real name Elspeth Zoe, looked like a princess to Andie. Her long curls tumbled past her waist, and her round eyes never missed a thing. When Bunch was born, she was so pretty that everyone made a fuss over her. Andie, who was two at the time, believed the baby was hers and whispered stories about what they’d do when Honeybunch, the nickname that stuck, was older. Bunch grew into a cute girl who danced and made people laugh and was also kind.

“This Story Box is a cheat,” Bunch said now, most unprincess-like.

Andie realized she hadn’t been telling the story the way her father had read it to her. She wasn’t sure why, but it’s the way it had come out. Somehow the bear wound up in her version. Andie felt its presence and its dream were important.

Just then NeeNee thumped down the steps from the apartment upstairs and into the diner. Removing the glass dome of a cookie platter, she slid sugar cookies into a container.

“Andie, would you take these down the hill? They’re probably hungry right about now.”

Out of habit, her grandmother checked the Juneberry Blue clock that hung above the wall phone. The hands were little soft-drink bottles, and the “numbers” were the red, yellow, and white bubbles of the Juneberry Blue logo. The clock had been stopped at 3:05 since Andie could remember.

“Tanner and Sweet? Yeah, they’re always hungry.” Andie closed the lid of her Story Box, turning it back into an ordinary cigar box.

“Can I go too?” Bunch asked.

“It’s bath time for you.” When Bunch had skipped up the stairs, NeeNee asked Andie, “Is your recipe coming along? Test Day is day after tomorrow.”

“Working on it.” *And waiting for you to help me.* “Can I stay down there a while?”

“Be back before full dark.”

“I know.” Andie got that living in an abandoned town wasn’t always the safest, but honestly, no one ever came here. What was there to worry about?

Outside, twilight had stained the sky purplish-blue. A few stars winked. Tanner would correct her that they were planets, but Andie was content with their twinkly presence.

Main Street’s cracked blacktop sprouted weeds. She passed Sweet’s tidy yellow house. Then the Juneberry Blue factory, a three-story brick building with a tower and smokestack on top, its doors boarded up tighter than a tick. The factory’s sign over the lintel was scabbed with mold. She’d always been curious to see the inside, but she and Tanner and Bunch were forbidden to go in.

The Lodge—a fancier-sounding name than what it was—loomed next. The town hall once occupied the first floor. The second floor had held a community center,

back when there had been a community. Now Tanner lived in the Lodge with his great-uncle and guardian, Orwell Dellinger. Tanner's parents worked on an archaeological dig in the Italian Alps. Because the site was so remote, Tanner hadn't seen them in several years.

Beside the Lodge stood Lost and Found, a once-grand Victorian showplace that now housed a thrift shop. That was it. The rest of the town was shuttered and, except for a lone robin singing down the night, silent as a graveyard.

At the bottom of the hill, where Main Street met the two-lane county road that led away from town, she found Sweet and Tanner. They were both hunched over Sweet's telescope.

"NeeNee thought you might be getting peckish," Andie said. She set the container of cookies on the seat of Sweet's folding stool.

Some nights Sweet put out his *ROADSIDE ASTRONOMER* sign that advertised a five-minute viewing and mini lecture, charging fifty cents for adults, fifteen cents for children. "Hardly a high-paying job," he'd joke. On the rare occasions that anyone did stop, Sweet let people view stars as long as they wanted, for nothing. Tonight, he'd left his sign at home.

“What are you looking at?” Andie asked.

“Trying to bring in Mercury,” Tanner answered, reaching for a cookie without taking his gaze from the eyepiece.

“Your grandmother makes the best sugar cookies in the county. Be sure and thank her.” Sweet smiled at Andie.

Sweet’s real name was Stance Lundy. He was eighty-three years old, and everything about him was mild, from the expression in his faded blue eyes to the soft line of his jaw to the plain button-down shirts and khakis he wore winter and summer. The few strangers who came to Morning Glory assumed he was just a harmless old man until he spoke, not with an old man’s hesitation but with the crisp authority of an air traffic controller.

“Can I look?” she asked.

“Sure.” Tanner stepped back. “It’s too humid tonight. Mercury is just a haze. I hope it’s not cloudy during the occultation of Aldebaran next month.”

Andie squinted through the eyepiece but couldn’t see anything, really. She doubted Tanner could see anything either. He wasn’t even wearing his glasses. She didn’t ask about the occultation of Aldebaran, knowing she’d get a very long, very complicated answer.

“Tomorrow is Midsummer’s Eve,” Sweet remarked.

Andie's stomach fluttered. The day after that was the first official day of summer, but for her it was Test Day.

Sweet went on. "Ancient astronomers were afraid that on that evening, clocks and astrolabes would go haywire. People lit bonfires and rolled flaming wheels down hills to prevent spirits from crossing the border."

"What border?" Andie asked, not admitting she had no idea what an astrolabe was.

Sweet waved an expansive arm. "The border between this world and the spirit world. Once, people believed that at certain times of the year the boundaries separating the two were thin and they could cross over. Or spirits could come here. Halloween is another of those times."

"Spirits. You mean like ghosts?" Andie sounded doubtful.

"Ghosts, witches, fairies, any unexplained beings. Folks got nervous when the sun appeared to stand still in the sky at midsummer. They worried about their crops and livestock. An unpredictable sun would ruin them."

Tanner stuffed another cookie in his mouth and spoke around crumbs. "Midsummer's Eve is just a regular day that happens to come before the summer

solstice. Sweet, you study quantum physics! You can't believe this stuff!"

Sweet shrugged. "So? I like to look at all sides."

Tanner barreled on. "The solstice occurs each year between June 20 and June 22 when the sun is directly above the Tropic of Cancer. It's at its greatest strength then. This year it falls on June 20."

Tanner was eleven, same as Andie, but he talked like a college professor. She didn't want to seem completely stupid, so she looked up at the sky and asked, "Which constellation is the Tropic of Cancer?"

He laughed but not meanly. "It's not a constellation. It's a latitude, an imaginary circle around the Earth. After Midsummer's Day, the longest day of the year, the days grow shorter."

Andie already knew Test Day would be the longest in her life. She had no idea what to expect, like the people in the olden times who were afraid the sun would stay stuck in the sky.

"I'm going back," she said. Maybe NeeNee would finally talk to her about Test Day.

"Want Tanner to go with you?" Sweet asked.

Like everything else in Morning Glory, the lone

streetlight didn't work anymore. Darkness in summer started out slow, then dropped like a curtain. When she'd left the diner, Main Street had been cloaked in deep gray. Now it was full dark, as NeeNee called it.

"I'll be fine."

Andie walked slowly back up the hill, weighed down by expectations of Test Day.

Because this was her eleventh summer, she was traditionally the right age to see if she would inherit the family gift. She was supposed to create a new recipe that would change people's lives. A very tall order. She had a vague idea what her recipe would be, and she knew what she wanted to achieve with it. But she had no clue about the key ingredient: intent.

The woods loomed close, casting vast shadows. In the ditch along the road, a pair of frogs held a serious conversation. In between the frogs' deep, thrilling *reeps*, she thought she heard whispers.

She considered turning back to ask Tanner to come with her. But then Sweet would insist on packing up. She didn't want to spoil their sky-watching.

Night intensified sounds. She didn't hear whispers at all, she told herself. Just frogs.

Just then, something small and white skittered across her path. Her pulse thrummed in her ears. That did it.

Her courage in splinters, Andie ran the rest of the way to the diner.