

CHAPTER ONE

“What the heck?!” David shouted, as he fell into midair. He caught himself on the arm of the sofa and clung for dear life.

Who dug a hole right in the middle of the library floor? he thought.

He kicked out his legs to see if he was near the bottom. He didn't find it. He kicked leaves and wood instead. David looked around.

What? How did a tree get here?

He tried stepping on the branch to climb back to the safety of the couch that happened to be in a tree, but the branch broke beneath his weight. The sudden jolt caused his fingers to slip a little bit.

“No. No. No. Please no,” he begged.

David tried to pull himself back up, but he was losing his grip.

“Help!” David screamed. “Is anybody there?”

He tried a second time to rise up back to safety, and his arms gave out. He was falling. Instinctively, David swung his arms out to catch himself, but his hands slid off the smooth fabric and down he fell.

David's fall was not a smooth one. As he fell, he got smacked, scratched, and beat the whole trip down by he didn't know what.

David's life didn't flash before his eyes. All he could see was the grass below grow closer and closer. He tried reaching out for anything to grab onto. but only got handfuls of leaves in return. David could see the features of the ground floor get clearer and clearer until – *slam!* – David crash landed into a coffee table. In case you are wondering, coffee tables are not the most comfortable objects to break your fall.

With the wind knocked out of him, David focused his attention on breathing precious air instead of the details of this very unusual situation. Gradually, as more oxygen traveled to his brain, he could think again. He tilted his head from side to side, noticing some of his surroundings.

Did I just smash into a coffee table? David observed more of his current environment. He saw grass, trees, and leaves. *Did I just smash into a coffee table in the middle of a forest?*

“What on earth is going on?” David said to himself.

On his back with pieces of shattered wood underneath him, David looked up at the tree he had recently exited.

“Is that a couch?” David knew they didn’t belong in trees, but there it was. That must be what he fell out of when he woke up.

David gently sat up and put his hand to his head. Where he touched his head stung. David let out a surprised yelp. *Did I injure myself in the fall?* For some reason, he felt that the bump on his head must have come from something else. But just what, David couldn’t remember.

Taking in his surroundings, David found himself in a clearing surrounded by a dense wall of trees. He looked at the handful of leaves, and he felt the wet spiky grass beneath his feet. Slowly, the thought formed in his mind. He shook it away, but it reformed even faster. Eventually, he just had to say it.

“I don’t think I’m in Mr. Linden’s Library anymore.”

Was this a prank?

“Hello?” David called out. “Mr. Linden?”

He looked around, but there was no response. Mr. Linden wouldn’t have moved a sleeping boy into the middle of a forest and up into a tree. Granted, Mr. Linden did have a reputation for having weird habits, and David honestly didn’t know him that well yet, but he could feel this wasn’t something that man would do.

Maybe his school friends? It had to be.

“Guys?” David tried again. “Okay, you had your fun. You can come out now.”

David didn’t think falling out of a tree was really that fun, but it was the type of prank his friends would pull on him for abandoning them this summer to stay with Mr. Linden instead of lounging by the pool, riding bikes to the movies, or playing summer league lacrosse. “I’m the one who was abandoned, not you,” he muttered.

“Guys?”

Still no answer.

David got to his feet and studied the large tree in front of him. He circled it to get a better view. He looked at the intricate branches of the old wooden beast. David liked his friends, but he admitted, “There is no way they could have pulled this off.”

Instead of spending too much time imagining how a bunch of high-schoolers could manage to get a couch and a boy out of a house, into the woods, and up into a tree without that boy waking up, David decided he needed to shift his focus to more pressing matters. First, he was still in his T-shirt and pajama pants that he went to bed in last night. The crisp morning dew on his bare feet was starting to feel uncomfortable. Second,

he needed to figure out where he was. Most likely he was still somewhere on the grounds of Mr. Linden's estate, but David had not yet gone exploring. The only way to find out was to start walking. *But which way?*

David scanned the wall of trees around him hoping to find traces of the roof or a chimney from Mr. Linden's mansion or at least find the hints of a trail. No luck. While circling the clearing, David forgot to look where he was stepping and stepped on a jagged piece of what used to be a table.

"Ouch," he yelled.

David jumped back, slipped on the wet grass, and fell back onto the pile of broken wood a second time.

"Twice in one day!"

Someone giggled nearby. David sat up quickly and spun his head around in all directions. "Hello?" More giggling. "Is someone there?" he called out. The giggling was coming from another direction now. "I have a weapon."

"No, you don't," a small voice said.

David turned around again and saw a young girl leaning against a tree, her long hair in braided pigtails pouring over her shoulders. She was short and skinny, but also slightly rough and tan. She was a little girl, make no mistake, but David had the

feeling this tomboy in shirt and ripped shorts could definitely prove her worth if the time came.

She spoke again. "I checked you while you were sleeping. You have nothing on you. Nothing of value anyway."

David felt silly to still be wearing his pajamas.

"Who are you?" he asked. "Where am I?"

"You don't know where you are? These are the woods of Ethelrod. Don't you recognize them?"

Ethelrod? David was admittedly new to the area, but he had never heard of such a place. Then again, maybe there were forests all over that had official names he never knew of or cared to read about.

"Look, do you know a Mr. Linden? Can you tell me how to get back to his place?" David asked.

"I don't know who that is," she replied.

This was frustrating. He tried an easier question, silly as it sounded in his head. "Can you at least confirm I'm still in Michigan?" That question should be a no-brainer for a little girl like this.

She stared blankly. "What's a Michigan?" Looks like it wasn't that simple after all.

“A state...” The girl showed no recognition. “In the United States of America...” Nothing. “Okay, what did you say this place was called again?”

“Ethelrod,” she answered. David could see a slight change coming over the girl’s face. “Haven’t you ever heard of it?”

“Of course not,” David said. Ethelrod? Was there really such a place? If it was local, he’d never heard of it. If it was a city or a country, the same applied. Was this a place he should know about? Maybe if David had read more, he might have heard about it. What kind of name was Ethelrod? “Where am I? What is Ethelrod? Who are you?” he asked again.

“Then...then you are a visitor.” Her body seemed to tense. “Quick, what is your name?”

“Hold on. I asked you first. Tell me your name,” David demanded.

“My name is Gretchen,” she answered. “Are you a visitor?” Gretchen inched backward with slow footsteps. “I’ve been told all visitors are hurtful and should not be trusted.”

David gave in. “Well, I am a visitor, but I promise I won’t hurt you. I have no idea where I am. My name is David.”

She relaxed. “Well, David, we need to get you to the king. All visitors must see the king, but I’ll admit we haven’t had any

visitors to these parts for quite some time. And the country is not very welcoming to them.”

King? Country? If this was still part of a childish prank, it had gone on long enough. What were the odds that his friends had knocked him on the head and transported him on some cargo plane to another location? It would explain the bump on his head, but no way. His friends weren’t that good. Or that rich. This girl obviously had to have something wrong with her. He needed to leave now and find his way back.

“To the king?” David questioned. “I’m not seeing any king. I need to get home. Now.”

“But you must!” Gretchen exclaimed. “It’s a custom. Just come with me, and everything will be fine.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t sound like something I’m going to do.”

“We aren’t allowed to just let visitors to Ethelrod wander around. If we find one, it is the law in this land to bring them straight to the king. Come on, let’s go.” For a little girl, she was pretty sure of herself. She had no problem telling a boy clearly more than a decade older than her what to do.

“The law of the land? I am not from this land,” David debated. “I’m not even sure I believe you. I’m still in Mr.

Linden's backyard somewhere. I have to be. And I am going to find my way back, with or without your help."

"But in Ethelrod—" she started.

David interrupted. "There is no such place as Ethelrod! I'm going home."

David turned and walked away quickly into the thickness of the woods, leaving the little delusional girl behind him.

CHAPTER TWO

David fought through strong branches and kicked his way past thick undergrowth. He didn't know where he was going, but it had to be better than following a little girl into the hands of a king who ruled a country with a crazy made up name that hated visitors. No, thank you.

David tried to follow a straight line. Eventually he would hit the end of the forest or a road or something that would help him find his way. What he did find, however, was not as useful. Unsure of the sound, David walked toward what he thought was a highway, only to find a vast and thundering river. There was no way across, and it looked like the river went on for miles.

Even though David didn't grow up living near Mr. Linden, he was positive there weren't any rivers like this in the area. Well, he was pretty sure. Was he sure? If only he had actually read his geography book, he might have known more that could tell him where he was and how to get back. Maybe that textbook was more useful than he originally thought, but in his defense, that class was unbearable.

Only a week ago, before waking up in the middle of the woods, David had been sitting in class, bored out of his mind. Ticking off minutes in his notebook wasn't the most stimulating activity David could think of, but it was better than what everyone else was doing. While the teacher wrote notes on the board, the students were asked to read from their required novels. David hated reading. He felt that watching the clock and adding dashes to the margin of his notebook would be a much better use of his time.

David crossed out the number five. Five minutes left in class.

He didn't dislike others who read. He didn't have a problem with that; reading just wasn't for him. Why should he read two or three hundred pages to learn a lesson the teacher will just tell him later in class? Why put in all of that extra effort when there were more important things to worry about, like keeping his A in chemistry or the upcoming lacrosse playoffs?

David crossed out the number four. Four minutes left in class.

David preferred television and video games, where the action and characters were right there on the screen in front of him. When he read books, they were just black and white symbols on pages. Words didn't really mean much to him. He couldn't follow along with the books his teachers chose and was never able to visualize the setting or the characters, which made it even harder to figure out who was who and what was happening. It was a struggle for something that wasn't even really worth it in the long run. Boring.

David crossed out three. Three minutes.

David had more important things to do, like count down the minutes until the end of class. Then, he would be free from the school day, and he could do what he wanted. And in just a

few more days, it would be summer vacation, when David wouldn't be expected to read or think for a few months.

Two. Two minutes.

Finally, the bell rang and students packed the halls, eager to be anywhere but there. David was almost trampled by a group sprinting out of the biology lab where a stink bomb had just gone off. He politely held the door open for a female teacher and continued to hold it open for another soul in need, a student carrying a pile of books and crumpled papers that was whispering frantically to himself, worried about the upcoming finals. David just shook his head at the poor fellow putting so much time and effort preparing for a few short hours of his life. David wasn't a lazy kid; things just came easier to him so he was able to work less and focus on the things he actually wanted to do instead. This did not include rereading chapters upon chapters of uninteresting texts for school.

"Hey, Dave! Wait up!" Paul ran through the crowd. David noticed that Paul had fallen asleep in the last class and missed the bell. David had wondered whether or not his friend would make it to the bus on time. "Do you have a geography textbook I can borrow?"

“Yeah, sure,” David replied. “Come with me to my locker to get it.”

Paul followed. “You sure you don’t need it? It’s the first final this week.”

“No, I haven’t used that thing all year.” Paul looked at David in disbelief. David explained, “Everything we need to know is from class. As long as I take notes, pay attention, and ask questions, I can get away perfectly fine without ever opening the darn thing.”

“But what about all of the applications and stuff for the exam?” Paul asked.

“I’ll figure something out. I always do,” David said. “I get good grades, so why spend more time reading? What good has that ever gotten me?”

Paul shrugged. “I guess you’re right. You have better grades than me, so something must be working.”

They reached David’s locker, and David put in his combination. Paul asked, “What about English class? What about all those novels? Some of them were pretty good.”

David joked, “Yeah, I liked their summaries online.” Paul laughed. “But let’s be honest, when am I ever going to have a

conversation about Charles Dickens or Jane Austen these days? Give me math and science, stuff I can actually use.”

David took out his hardcover geography textbook, whose spine had never been broken, and handed it to Paul. “Keep it. I can make it the last few days without working on my mapping skills.”

Boy was David wrong about that. Having at least some knowledge about major rivers in the area would come in handy right about now. Maybe walking in a different direction would do the trick.

Making sure he wasn't going directly back the way he came, David picked a different direction and started walking. Without being able to completely see the sky through the trees, he wasn't absolutely sure which way he was going.

Dad gave me a survival guide book of crazy situations for my birthday one year, David remembered. It seemed worthless at the time. David never read it. I bet I could use something from there now.

Even though it probably had nothing to offer about falling asleep in a library and waking up in a new country, it might have had something to say about walking around the woods.

David continued walking and reached a clearing. His stomach dropped. His mouth was open wide in disbelief. There, in the middle of the clearing, was Gretchen. She was sprawled out on the grass, relaxing with her arms behind her head. She was wearing a circle of wild flowers in her hair, something she must have made herself to pass the time while David was away.

“How did you –” David began. “How did I –”

Gretchen got up. “There is only one path through the woods of Ethelrod, and there is no way you can find it without me.”

“I can and I will,” David protested. Gretchen pointed to the couch in the tree that clearly proved David had walked in a complete circle through the forest. “Okay, okay,” David conceded.

Gretchen smiled. “I’ve been thinking. The only person who would know how to get you back home would be the king. And since the king doesn’t even like visitors anyway, I’m sure he could help you get back.”

David tried to think of any other option, but was unable to. "How do I get there?" he asked. He was willing to play along for now. Hopefully, she could just lead him out of these woods and he would be able to get home from there.

"Lucky for you, I'm on my way to give something I found to the king. Just another custom. You can come with me if you want." She pulled a satchel up over her head and onto her shoulder.

"Thanks, Gretchen." David agreed.

"Be sure and keep up, visitor!"

CHAPTER THREE

There was no exact trail and yet Gretchen seemed to know exactly where she was going.

"Are we almost there?" David asked.

"We have a ways to go before we get out of these woods," Gretchen told him. "You just have to be patient and trust me."

"For a little girl, how do you know so much about this forest?"

"I have lived in Ethelrod my whole life. I like the woods. I like them better than fishing anyway. My father is a fisherman. He always comes home smelly. The woods are better. And in the trees, I can be anyone or anything I want to be." David thought that sounded nice.

"Where do you live?" Gretchen asked.

"Well, right now I'm spending the summer with my Uncle Tom," he replied.

"The Mr. Linden you mentioned?"

"That's him. Well, he's more of a family friend," David said. "We aren't even related. It's just easier to say 'uncle' instead of explaining our weird relationship. I don't even know how my parents met him. They still call him my Uncle Tom, even though neither I nor my parents have seen him in years."

"But you are spending the season with him now."

"Yeah, my parents sent me away to live with him. All of my friends are jealous. Mr. Linden has a reputation of being mysterious and extravagant, but who knows what he's been doing shut up in that big lonely house of his."

"Lonely?"

"Big fences, no visitors, no wife, no girlfriend. He doesn't even go into town. He has his groceries delivered."

“It sounds like your parents are sending you someplace good, though. It must be a pretty nice house if he never wants to leave it,” Gretchen reasoned.

“Not as nice as where they’re going,” David added.

“What do you mean?”

“My parents are ditching me for some tropical couples retreat. I’ll be taking care of myself again this summer. It’s okay, though, I’m getting used to it by now. Over the past year, I’ve watched my parents and their relationship gradually unravel. Any time they were in the same room together, they were fighting. Fights usually involved me and my future, which in the beginning made me feel guilty. I eventually came to the idea that they were actually fighting about something more though. The fights were getting pretty bad, so I’m happy to see them go on this retreat, even if I did see that their hotel reservation involved separate rooms.”

Why am I opening up like this to a total stranger? David thought. He wasn’t sure, but it felt nice to say things he hadn’t even talked about with his school friends.

David continued. “If my parents aren’t fighting, they were barely speaking. This wasn’t that much better for me. No communication meant no coordinating driving schedules or

dinner plans. This past season, I've grown used to finding rides home from lacrosse practice or games." David even learned how to cook from videos online after too many microwave meals to count.

"It sounds like you have a lot of responsibilities," Gretchen commented.

"At home, I'm only responsible for myself, but I'm good at it. This summer wouldn't be a whole lot different than before. My friends are too far away to hang out with, and Mr. Linden, even with all his money, doesn't believe in owning a TV. Another summer on my own taking care of myself."

Another boring, regular summer for David.

At least, that's how it started. One night at Mr. Linden's, and now David was walking through trees following a little girl who believed they were in a make-believe country. At least this little mishap was shaking things up a bit.

CHAPTER FOUR

After about an hour of walking with Gretchen, the woods opened to a large field. On the other side of the field, David

could see a medieval town with a very large stone building in the center that he could only assume was where the king lived.

David blinked and blinked again.

“Is that a—” he could hardly finish his sentence. “Is that a castle?”

“That, David,” Gretchen said, “is the high kingdom of Ethelrod. I told you I wasn’t making it up.”

His head started spinning and he couldn’t control his breathing. He turned away from Gretchen and threw up. Gretchen gave him a leather pouch of water from her bag, and he could stand straight again.

“A castle? Ethelrod?”

There was no way anything like this medieval town could have existed without people knowing about it. Was it all true? Was he really in a place called Ethelrod? It couldn’t be. How did he get here?

Gretchen caught him before he completely collapsed on the ground.

“You really aren’t from here, are you?” she asked.

“I’m really not.”

“Then, let’s see about getting you home.”

“I would like that a lot,” David replied.

They crossed the field of tall grass and wildflowers like the ones Gretchen had in her hair. Eventually, they made their way to the streets of the town that were filled with people going in and out of shops. Even more shopping and trading spilled over to carts in the streets. Gretchen walked proudly through the street as if nothing was different, and yet everyone else stopped what they were doing and stared.

David could feel their attention on him, probably because he was in public in his pajamas in the middle of the day. Yet, these people weren't wearing clothes that were all too normal either. No jeans, no sneakers, no T-shirts. Everyone looked like they were out of place and out of time. Had David come across some type of renaissance fair? That sure would make up for the fact that he was seeing horses instead of cars and shops for cobblers instead of electronics. In fact, no one seemed to have any electronics. David couldn't even find a renaissance worker sneaking music through a strategically placed ear bud snaking down to an MP3 player. No one was even texting in the back corner. Was this place and were these people for real?

He and Gretchen traveled through a maze of cobblestone streets before ending up in a large town square where people were already gathered. On a raised platform was a pair of finely

dressed people. One was an older man who looked pretty kingly. David had never seen a king in person before, but he assumed this was what one would look like. He stood before the crowd and commanded everyone's attention in a regal manner. He wore long, brown fur robes that made him look like there was plenty of strength underneath. His hair was gray and black, as was the pointy thick beard on his chin. If there was still any doubt whether or not this man was king, there was a gold crown on his head.

The other person standing with him was a female, younger, but just as well dressed. She wore a deep red dress with a white fur cape. Her blonde hair was woven into a pattern that spilled down her back. This girl must have been the king's daughter because she wore a matching crown of silver.

The king was speaking, addressing the crowd that had gathered. He seemed to be in the middle of a very important speech, but that didn't stop Gretchen from interrupting.

"My Lord!" she yelled. "I have found your visitor!"

The king stopped talking and looked out to the crowd to find the small voice that was Gretchen. She was found for him, though, when the rest of the crowd stepped back and formed a circle around her and David. The king on his platform squinted

in their direction and motioned for them to come closer. The crowd parted and they made their way to the platform and climbed up.

When David was on the platform, the king circled him, studying him up and down before speaking. Once again, David really wished he wasn't in his pajamas. He thought the king was going to criticize his dress code, but he was wrong.

"We were expecting you earlier," he said.

"I'm sorry. Expecting me?" David replied.

"You are a visitor, correct?" he asked.

"Yes..."

"We have long prepared for this day, yet thought it would never come. We have been left alone for centuries. Now, here you are! It's settled." The way he said it almost had David convinced as well. What was settled? "We don't get visitors in Ethelrod, none until you. The one we have been waiting for."

"Waiting for? Wait--What?"

"Take him!" Men and women started to grab at him excitedly. Gretchen tried to intervene.

"Take me? What is going on here?" David managed to shout as he was forced off the stage.

“We can now begin our contest!” the king yelled to the crowd.

Everyone cheered.

What on earth had David just stumbled into?

CHAPTER FIVE

David was shoved into a room, and the door slammed behind him. He tried to open the door, even though he heard it bolt tight. No luck; it was locked.

He had no time to register anything as he was quickly whisked away. While being pushed and shoved, David heard and saw snapshots around him that he could not make sense of: the king bending down to Gretchen who was whispering in his ear and showing something in her bag, the well-dressed woman on the platform talking to a man on the ground holding tightly to a sword at his belt. She said to the man, “Maybe I can talk to him. There is no need for that yet.”

Something told him that the pants, boots, mail shirt, and sword on a nearby bed were laid out for him. No way was David going to have anything to do with them. In fact, he purposefully

stayed on the opposite side of the room. Any contest that included these items was sure to end badly.

It seemed like David was there for hours before anything happened. He heard some bolts on the door moving, and Gretchen entered. The door locked again behind her.

“You’re not dressed,” she said, like there was no reason in the world for him not to have changed his clothes. She had thought. She wasn’t as finely dressed as the others he had seen in town, but she now looked more like a girl.

“Gretchen!” David found himself yelling, “What is going on?!”

“It’s an ancient tradition,” she explained. “All visitors to Ethelrod are to partake in a special contest. We haven’t had a visitor in centuries, so it is very exciting that you have come to us.”

“What is this contest? What am I doing here?”

“The contest is a challenge. A duel. To the death. For the right to marry the princess.”

“This is crazy! I don’t belong here. I’m not doing it,” he protested wildly.

“You don’t have a choice.”

“Hold on! I’m just a kid in high school. I can’t fight a warrior. I can’t marry a princess. I can’t marry anyone! I’m too young. I don’t even have a girlfriend. And fighting? I don’t even think I can-”

Gretchen slapped him across the face. She had quite some power for a little girl. “Listen up, David. You don’t have a choice. A refusal to partake in the contest means execution. You have to fight.”

“Let me get this straight. I fall asleep and wake up here. Now, I have to fight or die, but if I fight I may die. All this because I am not supposed to be here! I don’t even want to marry this princess.”

“It’s an ancient custom. And we are a very traditional people. We follow customs all of the time.” That jogged David’s memory.

“Why were you meeting the king?” David asked. “What custom were you following?”

“I found something. A treasure,” Gretchen said. “We are a poor people and all found treasure must be turned in to the king for the good of the kingdom. If we do not share as a people, there is a punishment. So I was turning in what I found in the woods when I found you.”

“What was it?”

“You should worry about your upcoming battle. You are about to fight the best warrior we have. If you win, you will marry her. If he wins, the kingdom gets to keep their princess.”

“But that means I’m dead.”

“Well, yes. So let’s try to not let that happen.”

“I won’t do it!” David yelled. “I’m just a kid. I can’t fight your best warrior. And, I can’t get married!”

“I’m sorry, David. This is the custom of our land, and it’s our tradition. You must abide by it...or I don’t know what will happen.”

David was about to yell, NO, but the look on Gretchen’s face told him that there was no other way.

“I don’t like it, but I guess I have to.”

With a small smile, Gretchen said, “Okay. Good. Let’s get you ready.”

She helped him change into the clothes laid out for him and explained that the contest would begin at dawn. When she left, the door was once again locked, and David had no choice but to wait until morning.

David couldn't sleep. The mattress was made of straw. Or hay. David never knew the difference. Was there a difference? All David did know was that it made a crummy mattress. Any time he moved, the rustling noise brought him back out of his almost slumber. It reminded him of his first night at Mr. Linden's when he was also unable to sleep.

That night was David's first night alone in a strange and unfamiliar place. What were his parents thinking? They sent him to live in a house that was not his, be in a room that was not his, sleep in a bed that was not his, and be under the protection of an uncle that definitely was not his. With all of this going through David's head, he was definitely not sleeping in this not-his bed. David tossed and turned, but could not make himself comfortable. The pillow was hard, his legs were getting tangled in the sheets, and David was getting frustrated.

I have to get out.

David decided to go for a walk. He thought he remembered his way around the place after the tour Mr. Linden gave him when he arrived, but it was different in the dark. Everything seemed strange and unnatural in the blackness streaked with random rays of moonlight. He couldn't remember the difference between which halls had the marble floors, or that

Persian carpet, or this painting of some old woman. It may not have helped that he started to change floors using main stairways and smaller staircases. As much as David didn't want to admit it, he was lost.

Should I start calling out for help?

That'd be far too embarrassing.

David turned a corner and up ahead saw some light coming from under a door. If anyone was in there, they could help him find his way back. He could pretend he was trying to find the bathroom.

Wait, isn't there a bathroom right next to my room?

"I'm going to need a better excuse than that," David admitted.

If anything else, maybe he would remember which room this was, and it would help him find his bearings. David placed his hands on the brass handles and pushed open the double doors.

The light was coming from a gently roaring fire from the fireplace at a distance across the room. He made his way into the room and bumped his leg on something.

"What was that?"

It took David a while to adjust to the dancing light. He had hit a table. His eyes surveyed the room and the arrangement of tables and seating.

"I'm in the library!" Now, David knew exactly how to get back to his room from here.

Earlier Mr. Linden had given him a tour. There was a billiards room, a ballroom, a conservatory, and all of the other rooms imaginable on the board game, "Clue." At the end of the tour, Mr. Linden opened the same double set of French doors with brass handles and led David into the library. It was filled with couches, end tables, loveseats, easy chairs, wing-backed chairs, and tables, each surrounded by wooden chairs and numerous different types of lamps. Every item stood on a thick carpet that muffled their footsteps as they walked into the center of the vast room. This was the tallest room David had yet seen on his tour. "This is my favorite room," Mr. Linden said.

He motioned to David to take a look around. When he did, David noticed that the walls were not plastered in checkered wallpaper like he first thought. Instead, from floor to carved elliptical ceiling, the walls were covered with books. There were ladders, platforms, and metal spiral staircases that could take you higher and higher to reach more books than David had ever

believed possible. He lost his breath at how impressive this room actually was. *But then again, he thought, it's only books.*

What a waste. An entire room full of pages and pages that no one had time any more to sit down and read. David doubted Mr. Linden had even come close to reading even half of one of these expansive walls full of books. Paperback, hard cover, they all were neatly lined up and ready to be read. David knew it wouldn't be him. If he were to bet, David would wager that there wasn't even one book in this room that could keep his attention.

If it never happens in school, it certainly isn't going to happen here during my time off.

Sure, he had nothing better to do this summer living in a stranger's house, but David never imagined he'd ever be desperate enough to read.

"Why is this your favorite room?" David asked.

Mr. Linden hadn't looked at him, but continued to stare at the numerous shelves and smiled.

"Each book is an adventure, David, multiple adventures of every sort imaginable. Open a book and anything could happen; anything is possible. And they only end when you close the book. It's that simple." He gazed at the books as if recalling each adventure he had been able to live out because of one of

those books. Then, his face grew blank, and he looked down at his new guest. "You should be careful, David," he warned. "It's easy to get lost in here."

David assumed Mr. Linden meant it was easy to get lost in the library or Mr. Linden's mansion, but he felt pretty confident he wouldn't be getting lost in a library or even stepping foot in it again, for that matter. And yet, here he was. By mistake, David had returned in the middle of the night to a room he never wanted to see again. Although David didn't really want to admit it, the room was also pretty creepy in the dark. However, at least now he had his bearings and could find his way back to his room.

David turned to leave but was stopped by a sudden noise. *Thump!* He turned back quickly and focused his eyes on the far corner.

"What was that?" David whispered.

Through tall windows on either side of the marble fireplace, faint moonlight entered the room. David could see nothing in the dim light and decided to go closer.

Was there someone else in the room? Was it just a bird that had hit one of the windows?

David kept walking.

He weaved his way around tables, chairs, couches, and lamps but found nothing. David was in the corner now, next to the window beside the fireplace. Did he just imagine it? His eyes slowly surveyed the room. Then, they found the bookshelves and his eyes traveled slowly up the levels and levels of books. Could it have come from up there?

David turned to the right and found one of the skinny spiral staircases. His hand clutched the cold metal railing, and he started to climb. He made it to the first level, and his footsteps on the metal grated platform were so surprisingly loud that David startled himself. He looked around. Nothing. But there was something. Above him, through the holes in the other grated platforms, David could make out a shape. He decided to climb even higher.

When he reached the right level, David was surprised to find there, on the middle of the platform floor, a book. It was a thick, sturdy looking book covered in bright red leather. The golden edges of the pages reflected some of the light from the fire below. David walked over and knelt by the book, but didn't touch it. He observed his surroundings. Around him were many other books of different shapes and sizes firmly and neatly

tucked into their shelves. There was only one hole on the entire level where this book must belong.

“How did you get here?” David wondered.

Did someone knock it over?

That would explain the noise he heard, but there was no one else here.

Did it just jump off? Or was it even this book that I heard?

David picked up the book and brought it with him back down the dizzying stairs to a couch for further examination. He placed the book on the coffee table in front of him.

“What makes this book so special?”

It was only a book after all. The red leather was soft and the gold pages were smooth. He turned the book on the table. There was no writing on the spine where one might usually find a title or the name of an author. The covers were equally empty. He decided to open the book to find more answers, but there were none. The pages inside the book were completely blank.

“What kind of book is this?”

He stared at the blank pages. David watched the shadows from the fire flicker across the page. He was hypnotized watching. His eyes grew sleepy. He looked over to the open doors that would lead him out into the hall and eventually to his

room. They seemed so far away. David wondered why anyone would want a house so big that it was a hike just to get to your bedroom. He thought it over and then decided to sleep right where he was on the couch. The book lay open next to him as he crossed his arms and nuzzled his head into the crook of his elbow and closed his eyes.

Mr. Linden had warned David about getting lost.

David woke up in a forest in a completely different country. *Maybe this is all a dream.* That thought reassured David. Maybe this time, when he fell asleep on his lumpy straw or hay mattress, he would wake up and be back in Mr. Linden's library like nothing had ever happened. *That would be nice.*

David fell asleep.

CHAPTER SIX

David woke up in the middle of the night. He stretched and was happy to be back on the couch in Mr. Linden's library. He moved his body and a rustling brought him back to life. What? David felt his hay/straw bed and looked around. He was still in his locked room somewhere in Ethelrod.

This is so not fair.

Moonlight lit the room, and David could see that he wasn't alone. A hooded figure stood in the corner. David shot up and felt around for the sword. A pale hand reached out to him.

"Wait."

David was not expecting such a soft voice from such a horrifying figure. He stopped searching for the sword. The figure reached up and removed the hood. It was the beautiful blonde woman from the platform!

"Princess?" he asked.

"You know me, sir?"

"It was a pretty good guess."

She introduced herself. "I am Princess Morgana."

"What can I do for you princess? Why are you here in my room when I am supposed to be fighting for your hand tomorrow morning?"

"I need your help," she said. "Please help me."

"I'm the one who needs help," David corrected.

"Then, maybe we can help each other."

She explained to David the loopholes in tomorrow's contest. A contestant need not actually kill the opponent, but have him in a position with no other option. David liked this

thought at first. Then again, he wasn't the best at the recent wrestling unit in gym. And those were high school boys. How was he going to beat an opponent that was the best Ethelrod had to offer? At least he didn't have to kill anyone now. And there was something about the prize as well.

"I thought the winner won the right to marry the princess." David was confused.

"No, this is a mistranslation from older texts. The winner of the contest holds the destiny of the princess," she explained.

"Which means?" he asked.

"This means that you have the option of marrying me or deciding my marriage for me. This is where my favor comes in." She continued to explain that her heart belonged to another. David assumed it was the man from the town square she was talking to who had looked like he wanted to get violent. If David had a girlfriend who was going to instantly marry some new winner of a contest, he guessed he would get violent, too. She told him that he could exchange his right to marriage for a piece of treasure, which would allow her to marry her love and would allow David to leave and try to find his way back to wherever he came from.

"I don't even know how I got here!" David said.

“Well, maybe something from the treasure room can help you return, but marrying me will not help.”

“Nor will losing the contest. I bet the other guy doesn’t know about the death loophole.” David couldn’t handle it anymore. “It’s all too hard. Too difficult. I can’t. I won’t.”

“Do you only do things that are easy? Do you give up when things don’t go your way?” Morgana questioned.

David wasn’t sure why, but he thought about the books in school he never even started. He knew they would be a challenge, so he never even opened them. He just pretended to read them instead. What was wrong with taking shortcuts if it meant he wouldn’t look like an idiot in class? He did what he knew he’d be good at and therefore never failed.

“So?” David replied.

“Just because something is tough or difficult, it doesn’t mean that it isn’t possible. The challenge is what makes something wonderful when you finally overcome your obstacles. The sense of success that comes when working hard over time is much better than achieving a simple task. Don’t be afraid of a challenge when it can make you a better person in the end.”

Princess Morgana was right. David agreed to help her and hopefully help himself get home somehow. All of this, however, depended on David surviving the contest.

The next morning, David woke up to trumpets and cheering. Gretchen told him the contest would happen in the square. He guessed the crowd was already gathered. David wondered if someone was going to come and get him soon, when the door burst open and numerous hands pulled him out into the square. A small section had been roped off.

That must be for the fight. Not too big of a space. Great.

It felt like one million hands were pushing him closer. His heart was racing, and David could feel it beating in his throat. He was tossed into the fighting section and looked around. There was no one else in the ring with him, but David did find a comforting face outside the ring.

“Gretchen!” He ran to the little girl, her hair still in braids.

“Don’t die today, David. It’s harder to have a life if you are dead.”

“I’ll try not to! I’m not a big fan of that option either. Where is this guy I’m fighting?” he asked.

“Here he comes now.” Gretchen pointed to a section in the crowd that parted for the best warrior they had to send. He was a large man with huge muscles, and David probably only came up to his chest. He got to the ring and held out his hand, feeling for the rope to climb over. A short man next to him whispered instructions, as the warrior fumbled over the rope.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“He’s blind,” Gretchen answered. “But do not let that trick you. His other senses are extremely strong. He truly is the best warrior Ethelrod has to offer. And the most deadly. Watch yourself, David.”

The king gave a short speech on his platform, as Princess Morgana stood next to him watching anxiously. After the speech, he rang a bell, and the crowd cheered so loudly it sounded as if a bomb was going off.

David barely had time to notice the fight had begun when a huge blade swung by his face. That first blow almost took David’s ear off. He could still hear the ringing left behind by his opponent’s sword cutting the air so near his face. It wasn’t necessarily the best face in the world, but it was his, so David

tried to keep it and himself as far away from danger as much as he could. This, of course, was easier said than done when staring down a gargantuan warrior whose only purpose was to hack you into a million tiny pieces.

How did he get to this point? Everything had escalated so quickly!

David could have created a list of people to blame, but he was too busy ducking another swing of the sword and somersaulting away from his opponent. Now backed into a corner, the mammoth of a man ran toward him swinging his hungry sword. David froze. He couldn't even think. The only thing David knew to be true as he looked near-death in the face was that a week ago he never would have predicted this was in store for his summer vacation.

His opponent swung his sword at David again. It would have chopped him in half if he hadn't moved to the right just in time. As he ran to the other side of the ring, the fighter's ears followed him and so did his blade. David stood still for a moment, and the warrior seemed to lose him in the cheering of the crowd. This might work. Just don't move, nothing will happen and maybe they will just end the contest.

The warrior did not cooperate with that plan. He screamed and started swinging his sword all over in an attempt to hit David or at least make him reveal himself.

“You can’t hide forever,” he yelled in his deep voice.

David reached for his sword and pulled it out of its sheath. Of course, the warrior heard this, slashed his sword through the air, and knocked David’s sword out of his hand. The crowd grew silent. David was worried.

“I can hear your breathing, boy. You scared?”

The warrior lunged his sword straight at David, but he ducked and somersaulted just in time toward his sword, skidding across a noisy pile of rubble.

“Running away are you?” the fighter called out in David’s direction.

Gretchen was right; this guy was good.

David started to stand up, and the pebbles at his feet made even more noise. The warrior started rushing at him. Without even thinking, it hit him. Suddenly, David knew what to do. David picked up a pebble and tossed it across the ring so that it clattered on the cobblestones on the opposite side. The warrior skidded to a halt. He turned in the other direction away from David. David kept at it. He threw handfuls of rocks in that

direction making as much noise as he could. The warrior kept striking the air and ground trying to find what he thought was David. If David was going to win this, he had to do it quick. He threw the last of the pebbles at his feet and ran toward the warrior. Hearing noises from both sides, the warrior struggled to make a decision. This delay was all David needed to slash the fighter's leg and bring him crashing to the ground, dropping his sword. With his foot, David held down the warrior's chest and put the tip of his sword to the man's throat.

"Don't move if you want to live," David told him.

He looked up eagerly at the platform. The king was confused, but Princess Morgana was whispering what David hoped were the loopholes of this ancient contest.

The king stood up and announced, "We have our champion!"

The applause was thundering. The same hands that pushed him into the ring this morning pulled David up onto the platform with the king and his daughter.

"And here is your future bride," the king said, as he shoved David toward Princess Morgana.

"Actually, your highness," David started. "I would like an exchange."

“Exchange?” the king roared. “My daughter is not good enough for a lowly visitor?”

“Father,” Princess Morgana interrupted. “Let him speak. He has won that right today.”

David continued. “Your highness, I choose to allow the princess to marry whom she will and command that they be wed immediately. And because I have done this, I will accept a gift from your treasury.”

The king had no words, but seemed to agree with the decision this time without any side conversations with his daughter.

“Very well.”

On the way through the crowd to the treasury, Gretchen found David and leaped onto his back in congratulations. “You did it!” she screamed.

“I did! And now I need your help once more. I’m on my way to find something in the treasury that will hopefully help get me home.” Gretchen nodded and agreed to help him search.

The guard left them alone in the treasury and told David he was only allowed to pick one item, but it may be any item he chose. Gretchen instantly shot off, and David lost her running through the mountains of gold objects. It was hard to believe what Gretchen said about this being a poor kingdom when this room was filled with so much stuff.

David sifted through the items and could not find any maps. There were no compasses, nothing to help him find out where he was or how to get back to where he came from. David was getting frustrated when he heard a familiar giggle behind him. He turned to see Gretchen, her hands behind her back.

“David,” she said. “I think this might help.”

From behind her, she revealed a brightly shining golden object that was moving quite quickly. Sheets of gold were constantly flipping around. What was this thing? David looked closer. It was a book! The golden sheets were pages. The book laid flat in Gretchen’s hands and the pages appeared to be constantly turning as fast as possible, while never reaching the end of the book. David took it gently in his hands, but the object felt familiar. He looked even more closely. This book had a bright

red leather cover and golden pages. Just like the book from Mr. Linden's library!

David felt the bump on his head. Everything was starting to come back now. That first night in the library, He lied down on the couch, crossed his arms, and nuzzled his head into the crook of his elbow and closed his eyes. Yet, David did not fall asleep. There was too much light coming from the direction of the fireplace. David could almost see it through his eyelids. David opened his eyes, but it was not the fire that they fell upon. It was the book in front of him on the coffee table.

Whether it was from the fire or not, the gold lining of the book's pages began to glow softly. Slowly, little hairs seemed to be growing out from the spine in between the pages. Was the firelight playing tricks on his eyes? Was this a symptom of not getting enough sleep? Then, David noticed they weren't hairs. They were vines that sprouted leaves and gently crawled their way out of the book. They twisted their way across the table and down the legs toward the floor that was no longer covered in a thick carpet, but grass and dirt. Around David, couches turned to

boulders and from the legs of lamps sprung trees growing high beyond the curved ceiling that was no longer present. Instead, they rose up into a dark starry night. A forest appeared as the library slipped away.

David didn't know what to do. How was one supposed to react when a room was transforming and being taken over by nature? He watched in awe as more trees were spontaneously shooting out of the ground, higher and higher. He jumped back as one came directly in front of him, but went too far. Behind him, another tree sprung up and a branch bashed David in the back of the head. He felt dizzy and collapsed onto the nearby couch.

He was groggy, but he could feel one final tree rise. It came out of the ground right underneath David's couch, taking it up into the air with David still in it. David felt the rush of wind as he was transported higher and higher into the branches of the massive tree. David tried to stay strong, but his head hurt and he couldn't keep his eyes open any more.

David remembered now. That book. That same book that magically transported David from Mr. Linden's library and into the kingdom of Ethelrod was now again in his hands thanks to the help of a little girl.

"This is my book!" David screamed in excitement. "But how did you —"

"I told you," Gretchen explained. "All treasure must be turned in directly to the king or else. I didn't know what to do. I didn't even know you then or that it actually was your book. It was just sitting there on the table. I didn't even notice anyone else was around until you woke up and fell out of that tree. I'm sorry, David. I didn't think it would be that important. It is only a book after all."

"Open a book and anything could happen," David repeated. He remembered Mr. Linden saying something about that. "Anything is possible. And it only ends when you close the book."

"Is that it? Is that how you will get home?" Gretchen asked.

"It's that simple."

David tried pushing the covers of the book together, but it was harder than he thought. It was like pushing two repelling

magnets together against their will. The pages kept turning and as the covers got closer and closer together, the golden light from the pages became brighter. As David was about to close the book, the light became so focused and so bright that he had to clamp his eyes shut so they wouldn't burn right out of their sockets.

When David opened his eyes again, there was only daylight. He could feel his arm against his face. He sat up to find himself in a chair at a table. Where was he now? David quickly looked around. The walls of the room seemed familiarly filled with books. Two tall windows let in the morning light as the remaining smoke smoldered on a dying fire in the marble fireplace between them. David was in Mr. Linden's library. He was back!

Did he ever leave? David found the red book he had discovered the night before on the table in front of him. The book was closed. Had he simply dreamt it all? David looked around even more for a signal, some type of sign; instead he found a face.

Sitting in a wing-backed chair nearby was Mr. Linden, smiling at him. "I told you it was easy to get lost in here."

"But I never even left," David objected. "I was here the whole time. I'm still in my pajamas!"

"If you say so, then."

David got up to leave, but knocked something over onto the floor. It clattered and clanged as it fell, and David went to see what it was. There on the carpet was a sword. But not just any sword, but the sword he had just been fighting with not moments ago. It did happen. It had to have happened.

A smile of joyous realization spread out over his face. David quickly looked up at Mr. Linden and his matching smile and said, "This is my favorite room!"