

Chapter 2

Wonderment

The winds and rain were shaking her window so much that it awakened her. When she looked outside, she could barely even see the houses across the street. *I wonder which one was ours. The one where we'd lived when we were so happy. When everything was so perfect. Which house was it? Where all that happiness remained trapped inside?* she thought as she unlocked the window and lifted up the bottom pain.

A gust rushed in and blew over the lamp beside her bed which fell over onto her stuffed dog Toto. A second gale ripped her My Little Pony poster free from its tacks and it floated for a few seconds about the room like a flying carpet. Suddenly she was completely absorbed by the impulse to know which house it was. She found the silver shoes beneath her bed and slid them on because they had been around then. There was no time to find her rain jacket. But it wasn't like she could feel the rain anyway. She couldn't feel anything.

Before she knew it, her legs were dangling out the window, her toes searching for the highest row of the trellis. Once she felt it, she shifted her weight out into the unrelenting downpour. Then she lowered herself step by step until her feet touched the ground. Repeating in her mind was a single thought, *"If you walk far enough, you will sometime come to someplace."* [*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum] That someplace had to be better than this place.

After some indeterminate period of time, she came to an intersection where she paused. It was impossible in this rain to know which road lead where, not that it mattered. Her head leaned back and she looked up at the pitch-black sky as rain pelted her face. Suddenly it occurred to her that it was all an illusion. Somewhere there was indeed a house where they'd once lived. But nowhere was there a home. And nothing was going to bring her mother back. Nothing was ever going to bring her back.

Among all the other raindrops, she felt one in particular land on the tip of her nose. She sneezed. Then again, a second time. And when she opened her eyes, there it was. Not the house that she couldn't precisely recall. But instead, a memory that she regrettably could. And somehow things got just a little darker.

"Why can't I come with you two?" she'd pleaded with her mother.

"You're not old enough yet dear," her mother had replied.

"I'm so tired of everyone treating me like I am a little baby. Oh, that's right. I'm not the baby either. I'm just the nothing in between," she'd then sassed for no good reason other than she was feeling forgotten.

Why didn't the wind do something useful like blow this stupid memory to hell from where it kept bubbling up? she seethed.

"I could never love anyone more than I love you," her mother had tenderly pacified.

"Sweetheart. I promise you that there will be plenty of time for you and me to get manicures, see sappy movies and to tell one another secrets while sharing an ice cream sundae by the fire. Now give me a hug," she'd attempted a second time. But instead, Zoë had turned her back on her mother just like she'd done to Kaitlyn earlier.

After their mother daughter spa day with Kaitlyn's friends, her mother had dropped her sister off for a sleepover. Then she'd stopped at the local grocery store for a gallon of vanilla ice cream, Magic Shell, whipped cream, sprinkles and a jar of cherries; ingredients for the perfect

ice cream sundae. She was only three blocks from their Baltimore home. Several immediate neighbors would later claim they had heard the terrible collision.

Maybe if I hadn't been such a brat. Maybe then mom would have just come straight home.

"I have so many secrets to tell you. But instead, they're all collecting inside of me. And I feel like I'm going to explode," she confessed as she tried wrapping her arms around herself. Up above, the sky looked like an infinite black hole that had swallowed up any pretense of eternity.

"You had no right to take her. I want her back. Give her back to me dammit," she provocatively screamed into the unsympathetic storm.

Just then she saw headlights flicker off the facade of the house across the street. Then the lights were right in her eyes. By the time she heard the tires skidding across the wet pavement all she felt was relief.

A mailbox tumbled by her in slow motion and the car eventually ended its skid in someone's front yard next to an ominous red tinted birdbath. Shortly after its brake lights extinguished, she heard a car door open.

"Oh my God. I almost didn't see you there?" a rattled voice called out.

Zoë watched the blurry figure approaching.

"Are you alright? What in God's name are you doing in the middle of the street in this storm?"

What am I doing in the middle of the street, halted at yet another intersection, held as a perpetual hostage between a sorrow-filled past and an undoubtedly tragic future? She began to walk away. Then run.

"Wait. Where are you going?"

"What happened?" a different out-of-breath voice asked.

"There was a girl in the middle of the street. I didn't see her until the very last moment."

"You're kidding. Where'd she go?"

"She took off running. West toward the mountain."

West toward the mountain, Zoë repeated to herself as she kept running.

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She raced by the row of ticket booths, jumped the train tracks and continued over the rainbow bridge. Even in the heavy rain, her silver shoes seemed to know where they were going. And she was in no frame of mind to argue with them. She slowed only when she saw the white cottage set back among the dark spruce trees. After jiggling the door handle and confirming it was locked, she peeked inside the glass. All she could see beyond Uncle Henry's cap on the wall was the unadorned wood box of an antique phone which gave her an idea. Though it wasn't a very reasoned one. She could use the phone to call Zeke. Then she could somehow explain away the confusion from earlier. Maybe arrange to meet him somewhere "private" tomorrow. This time there would be nobody to object.

She continued down the porch then around several water-soaked bushes to a window. When she pressed on the frame it lifted just high enough for her to fit through. She jumped up and pulled herself onto the sill. After a momentary tug at her neck came free, she rolled into the quaint room. Once inside she closed and locked the window behind her.

She brushed aside Uncle Henry's cap then lifted the bell-shaped black receiver off its handle and placed it up to her ear. Then she turned the simple crank a few times but still heard

nothing. It was a prop she realized. And how ridiculous of her to think she might get lucky for once.

She sat on one of the hard, wooden chairs at the simple wooden table. She couldn't believe she'd run this far. Suddenly she was terribly thirsty. The sink and the refrigerator were both props too she soon discovered. So instead, she took off her sopping socks and silver shoes and set them in the sink basin so that they might start to drip dry. Then she took off her soaking wet shirt and jeans, wrung them out and hung them on a pair of empty coat-hangers in a small open cubbyhole. There was a single pillow and a wool blanket on the shelf above that she wrapped herself in. Then she tossed the pillow on the bed and sat on the mattress edge.

It didn't seem possible that it had been just over twenty-four hours since she was here last. So much had happened since then very little of which seemed real. Maybe she had imagined it all. Maybe she had returned so that she could wake up from this unbelievable dream.

She loosely French braided her hair so it wouldn't be such a mess when it dried then laid back on the pillow. The winds were still howling outside and the rain continued to pelt the tin roof above. But for the moment, she was safe and dry. There was so much more to think about. But she was in no condition to do so now. She'd just have to worry about tomorrow when it came. She closed her eyes and soon fell fast asleep.

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"Cuckoo. Cuckoo," she heard from a great distance. The second time it seemed closer. And the third woke her from a deep sleep.

Zoë sat up in the bed and looked around what was becoming a familiar room. A pair of tiny wooden doors flipped open and a cheery bluebird appeared. "Cuckoo. Cuckoo," it repeated as it wheeled around the clock face then disappeared into another set of wooden doors on the other side. The clock indicated it was nearly 9:00 in the morning which was earlier than she usually woke up on a day off.

"I wonder what Aunt Em is making for breakfast?" she joked to herself. Then she looked through the window she'd climbed through and saw that the storm had entirely passed. She wondered what kind of mess it had left behind.

When the wool blanket dropped from her shoulders, she noticed that her necklace along with her mother's golden charm was gone. *That must have been what had gotten caught on the window last night*, she recalled.

As she stood, she saw the bell-shaped phone receiver was dangling from its chord. She walked up to it and was about to set it back on its handle when she heard, "Hello. Is anybody there? Hello."

She placed the funnel up to her ear and leaned in toward the wood box. "Hello," she hesitantly replied.

"Who is this?" the person on the other end inquired.

"Zoë. Who's this?"

"I am the phone operator Mrs. Mirage."

"I'm sorry. Did you say Miss Mirage?"

"Actually, I'm quite sure I said Mrs. Mirage since I'm married to Mr. Mirage who would take offense to such a slight."

"Maybe we have a bad connection or something," Zoë excused. "I've never used one of these phones before. How does it work?"

“My dear. This phone works as any other phone works except when it does not.”

“I couldn’t get it to work last night in the storm,” she recollected. “I assumed it was a prop.”

“It is more real than any alleged storm that did not happen last night I can assure you.”

“That’s good then because I’d like to make a call,” Zoe announced.

“Do you have the number?”

“I’m afraid I do not.”

“How about a home address?”

“Sorry. No.”

“Well, you are making this connection quite difficult indeed. A name at least?”

“Yes. I do have a name. It’s Zeke Destefano.”

There was silence from the other end.

“Are you still there?” Zoë inquired. “Did you hear me?”

“I heard you dear. Aren’t you a little young to be calling a senior?”

“Wait. How do you know he’s a senior? Do you know him?”

“Zeke Destefano makes a lot of calls on sweet young girls like you,” she explained.

“Calls to.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You said calls on and I think you meant calls to,” Zoë clarified.

“I think I know the difference young lady. The question is, do you?”

“I’m sorry. I feel like we’re having two different conversations. And if it’s all the same to you, I’d appreciate it if you would just patch me through to him.”

“It is only a matter of placing the chord in a different jack and throwing a front key for me. Then you will be connected. What you do then is entirely up to you.”

“I’d like to talk to him ...” Zoë began but was interrupted by a cliquing noise.

“Hello,” a sluggish voice replied.

“Zeke?” she realized while she was still trying to make sense of the previous odd exchange. That had left her wholly unprepared for this one. *What should I say?*

“Who is this?” he grumbled.

“It’s Zoë. From the park,” she prompted him then held her breath.

“Zoë from the park,” he repeated. “I wasn’t expecting to hear from you after last night.”

She first exhaled. Then she strained to think of some plausible explanation. It would have helped to at least have known what excuse he’d been given. “I’m so sorry about that. The weather was so crazy,” she guessed.

“You mean that little sprinkle we got?”

“Little,” she laughed off. “The wind was so strong it blew one of my posters off my bedroom wall,” she innocuously recalled.

“It must have been worse at your house,” he allowed.

“It must have been,” she agreed. “So, I know that things didn’t work out yesterday. But I was thinking maybe...”

“Katie said I wasn’t to go near you again or your father was going to kick my ass.”

“My dad has never kicked anyone’s ass,” Zoë laughingly dismissed. “Besides, it was just a misunderstanding.”

“It didn’t sound like a misunderstanding. Your little brother said he had a baseball bat and wouldn’t hesitate to use it.”

Zoë snorted she hoped away from the receiver.

"It sounded like everyone in your house kinda hates me."

"Not everyone," she encouragingly added.

"Well that's good to hear. So, where are you?"

"Kansas, I think."

"Kansas?" he puzzled.

"That was an inside joke. Sorry."

"Are you making fun of me?"

"No. Of course not. It's just kind of been a weird morning," she backtracked.

"You woke me," he reminded her.

"I know it's early. But I thought maybe..." She drew in a deep breath. "...we could meet somewhere today."

"Today," he repeated.

"Yah. I'm free all day."

"That's good. Because I'm a little short on cash at the moment."

"You won't need any," she assured him skipping over his unoriginal attempt at a joke.

"That's good to hear. I don't usually date sophomores you know," he added and his voice was suddenly awake and sharp.

"It's okay since girls mature faster than boys," she'd embarrassingly evoked.

"You sure matured fast," he lewdly agreed.

She suddenly felt like she was playing a part of a person not herself. One that she wouldn't have even considered if not for the storm and the unusual circumstances that had followed it. But then who she had been wasn't exactly inviable. Besides, there was no going back now. The My Little Pony poster had made that much clear. Her family could continue to treat her like a child. But she was calling the shots now.

"I'm surprised you noticed," the new her insinuated right back.

"Oh, I noticed."

"I'm glad you did. So?"

"How about meeting me at the Land of Oz, at say, nine minutes after four?"

"That's an odd time," she noted but he ignored.

"Can you get there?"

She smiled. "I'm pretty sure I can. But I think it's closed today for the long weekend," she recalled her father saying.

"My dad does some work there. I can borrow his keys."

"Oh."

"And no flaking out on me this time."

"I promise I won't."

"How about now you promise me you will?"

"I will what?"

"I'll take that as a yes. See you at the front gate at nine minutes after four," he concluded then hung up.

She stood there next to the coat rack grinning from ear to ear. She couldn't believe how composed she had been. Now she had a second chance at a first date with the hottest guy in school. And this time flying monkeys couldn't keep her from it.

She reached to set the receiver down then suddenly imagined how worried her family would be once they figured out she was gone. Maybe she should have Mrs. Mirage connect her to home so she could at least tell them she was alright. But then they'd ask her all kinds of

questions and surely want to know where she was. And she simply didn't have the energy to deal with anything that wasn't fully aligned with her plan. She'd call after the date which would limit their worrying. It would also be undeniable evidence that he really liked her. In the meantime, she needed to get dressed. Then she was going to find something to do for several hours which hopefully included getting something to eat and drink.

She walked back over to the open cubby where she felt her shirt and jeans which were still wet. Behind them however was a bright yellow spring dress that she hadn't seen in the darkness last night. Likely it was a prop too. She slipped it over her shoulders and it was a perfect fit. Not to mention that it was a far cuter outfit for a date. She couldn't believe the way things were suddenly working out.

Thankfully her shoes and socks were entirely dry so she put them back on. Then as she stood for the door, she felt a draft. When she looked around, she saw the thin shears beside the window swaying in a slight breeze. "I could have sworn I closed you last night," she puzzled. As she was pulling the pain down to the sill, she noticed something shiny dangling on the frame.

"My necklace," she exclaimed as she unhooked it from the window latch that it was caught on. Unfortunately, it was broken and the gold charm was gone. She got on her hands and knees and searched. It was a small room without very many nooks and crannies into which something like a small charm could slip. Still, she did not find it.

Maybe it fell outside somehow, she hoped. She had so little left to remember her mother by. Losing that charm would break her heart all over again.

She stepped outside and heard the door shut firmly behind her. Remembering she'd left her wet clothes inside and hadn't put away the pillow and blanket, she jiggled the door handle. But it was locked.

As she walked along the porch, she noticed how bright and colorful things were. There were pink and purple flowers overflowing from a half-dozen patio planter boxes that she didn't recall being there from before. But then she'd been quite distracted. The red and white azaleas out front were in full bloom, playful birds splashed in a two-tiered concrete birdbath, and the little cottage even seemed to be freshly painted.

The azaleas continued around the side of the house. Before searching around the edges of the window, she checked to see if it was still open. It was not. *How was she going to explain her clothes ending up inside the cottage?* she wondered. Of course, she was going to have far more than that to explain eventually. But that was a worry for another day. She needed to find that charm then get ready for her date.

She squatted by the foundation of the house and felt around the lush green grass with her hands. Then she returned to her hands and knees, pushed aside the azalea leaves and searched below. *You've already taken so much of her. Please at least let me find the charm*, she pleaded.

"The Wicked Witch of the East is on the other side of the house," someone behind her joked. "But I guess you know that since you already found her shoes. Although those are a little hipper than I recall them being."

Apparently, the park wasn't empty after all. Zoë stood and brushed some grass stains from her knees. Then she nervously turned to see who was there. She was surprised that it was a young girl about her age dressed in a tan pair of pants fashioned from two burlap sacks, a denim shirt and pointed blue cap. Straw had been sewn into the outfit below the cap, around the shirt collar and sleeves, and at the bottom of her trousers. Large eyelashes and brows had been painted on around her big bright eyes and her nose had been made into an orange triangle.

“Aren’t you supposed to be hanging from a pole in a corn field?” Zoë replied feeling relieved that it wasn’t an adult at least.

“Fortunately, some sweet girl in ruby slippers let me down. I’m Kara,” she said extending her hand.

As Zoë stepped around a bush, she thought she recognized her. “Hey. You’re the girl that was painting the yellow brick road tarp at school.”

“I thought maybe no one would recognize me in this get-up,” Kara replied as they shook hands.

“It’s very authentic. And very cute,” Zoë offered.

“Thanks. So, you’re Katie’s sister.”

“Yes. Zoë.”

“As in Oz spelled backwards,” she recognized.

“With a smiling ‘E’ on the end. My mom’s name was Elizabeth and she was a die-hard Wizard of Oz fan.”

“Oh, I get it. The smiling ‘E’,” she recognized.

“It’s a little embarrassing.”

“It’s precious. I guess that makes me Kar with a silent ‘A’ since my mom abandoned me. Well actually, pawned me off on my grandparents to raise.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s alright. They are very nice. Just a little old-fashioned and a lot sedentary. So, were you looking for something?”

“Actually yes. I dropped a little gold charm.”

“Don’t tell me. A golden cap?”

“Actually, yes. It belonged to my mom. She was the first Dorothy here twenty-three years ago.”

“How neat. Is she coming for the Independence Day festival?”

“I’m afraid not. She died in a car accident a few years ago.”

“I’m so sorry,” Kara said as she pulled a tissue from inside her shirt and handed it to Zoë.

“It’s okay,” she replied as she used it to dab the corners of her eyes. “You had no way of knowing that. It happened while we lived in Baltimore.”

“It’s just not fair you know. My mom’s is a drug addict. A total drain on society. She’s caused several car accidents, overdosed twice. Yet somehow, she lives. And your mom...”

“She was hit by a drunk driver.”

“My God. I feel even worse now. It’s just not fair,” Kara repeated.

“Life is full of challenges I guess.”

“Well why don’t I help you look for it. Wait. You said it was a gold cap, right?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Because I saw Dorothy earlier.”

“Dorothy?”

“One of the girls that plays her. Funny that her name is Elizabeth too,” Kara recalled. “But she goes by Lizzie?” she said with a question mark added to the end.

“Mom mostly. Elizabeth to others,” Zoë understood. “So you were saying something about Dorothy before?” Zoë reminded her.

“I’m sorry. I get distracted sometimes. And don’t ask me to read anything because I’m dyslexic. I had to memorize the application to get this job,” she revealed with a look of determination on her face. “I guess they thought my stupid expression fit the character.”

“Weren’t Albert Einstein and Leonardo da Vinci dyslexic? And Walt Disney too. None of them were stupid,” Zoë reassured her.

“Tell that to my teachers.”

“You work here obviously,” Zoë redirected. “I thought everyone would be off today.”

“We’re getting ready for the grand reopening. There’s so much to do.”

“I’ll bet.”

“So why are you here then?”

“What?” Zoë stalled. She should have anticipated the question and had an answer ready. “My dad works here. And he was showing me around,” she borrowed from yesterday.

“Oh? What does he do?”

“He works with the animatronics.”

“Those things are so cool.”

“They are,” Zoë agreed. “So, Dorothy?”

Kara sighed. “I did it again, didn’t I? I saw Lizzie, Dorothy,” she corrected herself, “a half hour ago. And she said she’d found a charm near the cottage.”

“Did you see it?”

“No. She seemed to be in a hurry.”

“Do you know where she was going?”

“To Munchkinland I think.”

“Really?”

“Fraid so.”

“So how do we get there?”

“Follow the Yellow Brick Road,” Kara said with a big grin.

Zoë smiled too. “I guess I should have seen that coming.”

“You really should have. Shall we go find her?”

“Absolutely.”

“Follow me then,” Kara said as she skipped then twirled her way back toward the rest of the park.

Zoë stepped around the azaleas then caught up with her new friend at the start of the freshly painted and fully restored yellow brick path. Kara crooked her arm and Zoë cradled it.

“You ready,” Kara asked and the implication was obvious.

Of course, she knew the words to the song as well as the basic dance steps because she’d done both with her mom. “Ready as I’ll ever be,” Zoë replied.

“Here we go then.”

Follow the yellow brick road.

Follow the yellow brick road.

Follow, follow, follow, follow,

Follow the yellow brick road.

Follow the rainbow over the stream,

Follow the fellow who follows a dream,

Follow, follow, follow, follow,

Follow the yellow brick road.

*We're off to see the Wizard,
The wonderful Wizard of Oz.
We hear he is a whiz of a wiz,
If ever a wiz there was.
If ever, oh ever a wiz there was,
The Wizard of Oz is one because,
Because, because, because, because, because,
Because of the wonderful things he does.*

*We're off to see the Wizard,
The wonderful Wizard of Oz.
We're off to see the Wizard,
The wonderful Wizard of Oz.*

