

BEFORE THE BEGINNING



The woods were deserted that day.

The stones stood still and silent, as though they were waiting for something. At the center of them all, a jagged piece of amber glowed in the growing darkness. Lights fizzed softly around it, turning pink, orange, purple, blue.

No one saw it. No one ever did. Why would they? No one knew about its magic, not anymore. They had forgotten all about such magic a long, long time ago. About the same time they stopped believing in fairies. How foolish.

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The boy grumbled to himself as he crossed the darkening woods. “It’s not fair!” he muttered, panting as he clambered up the hill that lay halfway between school and home. It was mid-winter and the light was fading fast. The roads would have been quicker, but Tommy Williams preferred the woods, where there was no Danny Slater to trip you up and laugh at you on your way home.

Tommy’s cheeks burned with anger and shame from Danny’s latest bullying. It had been in the morning’s gym class—but it could just as easily have been anywhere and anytime.

“*Wimpy Williams can’t climb a rope! Wimpy Williams, what a dope!*” The taunt had followed him around all day, and now it had led him to retreat to the woods.

“I’ll show him!” Tommy said out loud as he reached the stone circle that stood at the top of the hill. “I’m *not* a wimp, I *can* climb. I can climb better than *he* can!”

And with that, Tommy flung his school bag on the ground and made for the stone in the center of the circle—the largest of them all. He found his first few footholds easily enough, his toes poking into

sharp holes in the side, his arms wrapped around the stone in a bear hug.

With a determination known only to those who have ever been desperate to escape the taunts of the Danny Slaters of this world, Tommy climbed onward, finding foothold after foothold. He pressed himself against the stone, felt around for crevices for his aching toes and burning hands. Breathless, filthy, and sweating, he finally grasped above him and felt the top of the stone. Mustering every last ounce of his strength, he heaved his body up, pulling himself to the very top of the stone. He'd done it!

Looking down, he laughed. "*Now* who's the wimp?" he shouted to the woods, his voice dying on the mist that was beginning to settle around him, along with the deepening darkness.

He clambered across the top of the stone, looking for a gentler route down than the sharp climb that had led him here. His parents would worry if he wasn't home before dark.

But then he stopped. Something was glinting at his feet. Something shiny among the gray that now seemed to envelop the whole wood. What was it?

He bent down and scrubbed at the moss and grime surrounding it. *This will prove I was here*, he thought. *Take this back to the class and tell them it's from the highest stone at Tidehill Rocks, and no one will call me tiny again!*

And so he scratched and scrubbed and pulled and heaved until, eventually, it came loose. It was like nothing he had ever seen, and Tommy was mesmerized. A shining, glistening piece of pure amber, it glowed and sparkled as he looked at it. It felt to Tommy as if he were holding pure magic in his hand.

"Wow," he said, staring at the jagged rock in his palm. As he held it, it began crackling and sparkling and lighting up like a fire.

Stunned and awed, Tommy held the rock carefully as he found an easier path down the back of the rock. Grabbing his school bag and throwing it over his shoulder, he glanced at the rock, now alive with color. It seemed to dance in his hand.

"You haven't ever climbed the tallest stone on the woods and found one of these, have you, Danny?" he asked out loud, laughing at the thought of the confrontation he imagined taking place the next day at school.

But there would be no confrontation the next day. And for Tommy Williams, there would be no school, either. Because the moment he walked through the gap in the stones to leave the circle, something quite unexpected happened.

Tommy, holding tightly on to his rock, took the step that divided the inside of the circle from the outside — and disappeared.

The woods suddenly felt colder than usual. The darkness hung more heavily.

The amber was gone — and now nothing would ever be the same again.

chapter one



Daisy

I'd been with the Admin and Liaison Department (ALD) for nearly two months when the news hit my screen.

To be honest, I almost missed it. Not because I wasn't concentrating—although I have to admit, ALD *is* the most boring department in the whole of ATC. (That's Above the Clouds, fairy godmother headquarters.) I'd been put here after what happened with Robyn's dad when he trapped me in a jam jar. My wing still wasn't back to normal since it had gotten crushed in the jar. But I was healing and couldn't wait to get back to doing real assignments again.

In the meantime, my job was to cross-reference fairy godmothers with their departments and match them up with their clients. I could do it standing on one wing—provided

it wasn't my bad one. So I hardly even thought about what I was doing. Punching in names, numbers, and departments didn't take a lot of concentration.

Which might be why I almost missed it when it came up on the screen. It wasn't one of my jobs to assign, so I couldn't see the details. But I saw enough:



JENNY FISHER. FGEAGLE5197. SRB.

SRB? No! I must be mistaken. I shut the page on my screen and walked across the office to the Clients file. I tried to saunter as casually as I could so no one would have

any idea what I was doing. Interfering with an assignment from another department is strictly against Fairy Godmother Code. If I was caught doing it, I'd be in terrible trouble.

Luckily no one looked up. They rarely did. ALD is generally quite a serious bunch. There's a reason why the fairies here aren't out on normal assignments. Sometimes it's injury-related, like it was for me. Others are here because they're not up to par for any of the "live" assignments. Both of which helped give ALD the nickname Angry, Lonely, and Demoralized.

I grabbed the file of clients' records and looked up Jenny Fisher. I checked all the details from my screen against the ones in the file. It was definitely her. Philippa's mom. I went cold. Why was she getting a fairy from SRB?

I glanced around to make sure no one was watching what I was doing. Then I jotted down all the details of the assignment on the back of my hand, carefully replaced the file, shut down my computer—and ran out of the office as quickly as I could.

Philippa 

"Are we almost there?" I asked for the twenty-fifth time.

Dad gave me the same response he'd given me twenty-four times already. "Almost!" he said, smiling at me in the rearview mirror and giving Mom a nudge in case she hadn't noticed his funny reply.

I sighed and got back to reading my book.

But then I noticed something outside the window. "Wait!" I sat up a bit straighter. "I recognize this road." I leaned forward and looked through the front windshield. "It's the woods!" I said. "*We are almost there!*"

"I told you we were," Dad replied.

"To be fair, you also said we were almost there when we hadn't quite reached the end of our street," Mom added.

But we were this time. We were on the outskirts of Ravenleigh. I felt a jiggle of excitement go through me. We were nearly at Robyn's house!

Robyn and I had met a few months ago when Mom, Dad, and I rented her family's former cottage for vacation. We'd kept in touch ever since, and she was one of my best friends now. The other one was Daisy. Daisy had been my fairy godsister

(which is like a fairy godmother, only one that's the same age as you).

Robyn and I had had a rocky start — especially after her dad trapped Daisy in a jam jar and tried to cut off her wings. But once everything had settled down, he'd completely changed. He was like a different man and had ended up becoming friends with my parents. So well, in fact, that he'd asked if we'd like to come back to visit over winter break. They'd booked us into the same house we stayed in last time — their old home!

Unlike my other friend, Charlotte, whom I'd lost touch with since she moved away, Robyn and I had kept in touch since that week, e-mailing and texting each other virtually every day for the last three months.

We drove up the gravelly driveway as it was starting to get dark. It was only four o'clock, but the evening was closing in around us already.

"Can I go over to Robyn's?" I asked, swinging the car door open the second Dad turned the engine off.

"I was thinking we might at least make it through the front door first," Dad replied over his

shoulder as he helped Mom out of the car, twirling her around and around.

“But I haven’t seen her for ages!” I said, vaguely wondering what it would be like to have parents who could go longer than an hour or two without breaking into a dance.

“Let’s get in and unpack first,” Mom said, letting go of Dad’s hands and opening the trunk. “Then you can run over to tell her we’re here.”

“Great!” I grabbed my bag and ran to the door. Minutes later, I’d squashed a week’s worth of clothes into drawers, flung a bundle of books and magazines on the bed, and shoved my suitcase underneath.

“See you later,” I called as I closed the door behind me and ran to Robyn’s.

Robyn and I sat in her room above the bookshop her dad owns and caught up on all our news.

I couldn’t help comparing it with what had happened when I’d gone to visit Charlotte the first time after she’d moved away. We’d spent a week not knowing what to say to each other. With Robyn, you couldn’t shut us up if you tried! I don’t know how we still had so much to talk about — but we did, and I wasn’t complaining.

I checked my watch. Nearly six o'clock. "I'd better get going," I said reluctantly. Mom had told me to be back for dinner. "See you in the morning?" I asked as I headed down the stairs.

"Definitely! I'll come over as soon as I'm up."

"Great."

I was about to turn to walk through the shop to go out when something moving across the floor caught my eye. A mouse! It ran across the shop floor and right over to my feet!

I screamed and ran back to the stairs. The mouse followed me. I stumbled halfway up the stairs and the mouse tried to follow, but the steps were too steep and it kept falling back onto the floor.

It stood at the bottom of the steps looking up at me with tiny green eyes.

"I've never seen a mouse with green eyes," Robyn said. She'd heard me scream and was looking down from the top of the stairs.

"Me neither," I replied, although at this moment, I didn't care what color its eyes were; I just wanted it to stop chasing me.

"It likes you," Robyn said with a laugh.

"Well, I don't like it!" I replied. "Make it go away!"

“Look, it’s got something in its mouth,” she said, coming down the stairs, bending down and reaching out toward it.

“Don’t touch it!” I screamed. Just then, the mouse dropped whatever was in its mouth, looked up at me once again, and scampered away.

I cautiously made my way down the steps as Robyn was examining what the mouse had left behind. It was a torn, crumpled-up piece of paper covered in mouse spit.

“Nice,” I said.

Robyn laughed. She dropped the paper into the trash as we headed through the shop. “See you in the morning,” she said at the door.

“Can’t wait!” And with that, I waved to her and to her dad, who was busily chatting with a customer. And then I headed back to the house for an evening of moussaka and Monopoly with my parents.

The next morning, Robyn was at the door before Mom and Dad had even woken up. Which isn’t that amazing, really. When Mom and Dad are on vacation, you don’t really get much more than snores and grunts out of them before lunchtime.

“Come on, let’s go out,” Robyn said. I scrawled a quick note, propped it up on the kitchen table, and followed Robyn outside.

We wandered around the village, talking and looking in shop windows. We paused outside Potluck, the pottery shop owned by Robyn’s friend Annie. She used to be Robyn’s mom’s best friend, but Robyn’s mom had died just over a year ago, and Annie and Robyn’s dad hadn’t seen eye to eye since then. They’d made up last time we were here, though.

“How are things?” I asked nervously.

“Fine,” Robyn said with a smile. “She and Dad are totally cool now. She comes over for dinner every Friday, and I’m allowed to see her whenever I want. She and Dad even go out walking together on the weekends sometimes.”

“I’m so glad,” I said. The shop was closed, but we stood looking at all the plates and bowls and animals in the window.

I was admiring a particularly handsome dragon when suddenly someone barged into me out of nowhere, knocking me forward so hard, I almost bumped into the window.

“Hey!” I spun around and came face-to-face with a woman staring into my eyes in a way that really

creeped me out. She was hunched over, with an enormous multicolored shawl looped over her shoulders and over the top of her head, a tiny little face that you could hardly see because the shawl was spread halfway across it, and a pair of beady bright green eyes boring straight into mine.

“Sorry,” I said automatically, and then felt foolish. Someone barges into me, almost bashes my nose against a shop window, and I apologize to them!

The woman stared into my eyes for another moment. Then, wrapping her shawl more firmly over her shoulders, she glanced around. She seemed to see something in the distance, because she suddenly shook herself and began to turn away. “Look after your mother!” she said in a rasping voice.

“What?” I said. “Why? My mother looks after *me*!”

But the woman was already walking away. A dark storm cloud seemed to follow her down the street. “Just do it!” she called over her shoulder.

A moment later, the cloud had turned to rain, fat heavy drops plopping down on the pavement all the way up the street. As the woman scurried away and out of sight, Robyn and I hunched together in the shop doorway and waited for the rain to stop.

“Well, that was bizarre,” Robyn said.

“Wasn’t it?”

“Did you see the way she stared at you?” Robyn threw her coat over the top of her head, wrapping it around her face just like the woman’s shawl. “I’m a strange little lady in a very weird outfit,” she said, imitating the woman’s rasping voice. “And you must do as I say!”

Then she laughed and pulled at my arm. “Come on,” she said as the rain shower passed. “Let’s head back.”

I followed her, lost in my thoughts. I’d laughed at Robyn’s impression, but there was something about the woman. Something about the way she’d looked at me. Her eyes. I couldn’t get them out of my mind. They reminded me of something, but I couldn’t think what it was.

I shook myself as we headed to the back of the shop and poured a couple of glasses of juice. I was being silly—my imagination working overtime as usual.

By the time we went upstairs to Robyn’s room with our drinks and some magazines from the shop, I’d forgotten all about the weird woman.

* * *

“Want to play a computer game?” Robyn asked.

I looked up from my magazine to see her opening a bag from the side of her desk. “I didn’t know you had your own computer,” I said. Robyn had e-mailed me lots of times in the last few months, but she’d always used her dad’s computer downstairs in the shop.

“Annie just gave it to me for Christmas. It’s her old one.” She pulled a laptop out of the bag and opened it up on her desk. “It’s pretty old, but it works well enough. Come on, I’ll show you a new site I found.”

I squeezed onto the seat with her and waited while the screen booted up. Before long, we were having ketchup-bottle gunfights, bursting balloons over each other’s castles, and chasing each other around virtual mazes.

I scanned the site’s list for a game we hadn’t played yet. As I looked down the screen, something caught my eye. “What’s that?” I asked, pointing to a tiny little star flashing in different colors around the screen. First it was orange, then it changed to yellow, then blue, flashing on and off so gently and moving around the screen so swiftly, it was hard to follow.

“What’s what?”

“Wait, it’s gone. You’ll see it in a minute.”

A moment later, it was there again, flashing at the top of the screen, so faint you would miss it if you weren’t looking out for it. “That!” I said.

Robyn shook her head. “I don’t know. I haven’t noticed it before.”

The flashing star had caught my curiosity. “Let’s see what it is,” I said.

We tried to trace it around the screen, while I pointed and shouted “There!” every few seconds, and Robyn chased after it with the mouse and clicked — just a second too late each time.

“It’s impossible!” she said, passing the mouse to me. “Here, you try.”

I tried for another minute or two with no luck. I was about to give up and suggest having another ketchup-bottle fight instead when the star appeared again. This time, I somehow managed to click at the right moment, and the star was instantly replaced by a bright white box with some squiggly text slowly coming into focus. “Got it!” I said with a smile.

“I hope we get more than a little box saying congratulations after all that effort,” Robyn said.

We stared and stared at the squiggly writing, but it didn't get any clearer. It just squiggled across the box, rising and falling in sharp peaks and valleys.

"Not even that!" I said sarcastically. "Great game, I must say!" I moved the mouse over to close the box. "Come on, let's go back to—"

"Wait!" Robyn grabbed the mouse. "Look. What does it remind you of?"

I watched the lines squiggle up and down across the page a bit more. "I dunno," I said. "Maybe those charts you get in hospitals that record your heart-beat and stuff."

"Exactly. It's showing the levels of something. Hold on a sec." Robyn moved the mouse to the volume button in the corner of the screen. The volume was muted. She clicked the icon and instantly a crackling, screeching sound came through the speakers.

"Yikes—what's that?" I clapped my hands over my ears.

"I don't know! Hang on." Robyn adjusted the levels of the various audio controls, and the crackling died down to a faint hum.

"What's that one?" I asked, pointing to an icon that stood apart from the others. It looked as if it

had been added on separately. The others were all square boxes with a circle inside them. This one contained a star with a red line through it.

“No idea,” Robyn said.

“Try it.”

She clicked the star. As she did so, the red line disappeared and the humming sound instantly stopped. The computer was silent. For about two seconds. Then something incredible happened. We heard voices coming through the speakers! And not just any voices.

“That’s— that’s—” Robyn stared at the screen, watching as the squiggly lines danced up and down in perfect time with the rise and fall of the two voices.

“I know!” I said, although I could hardly believe what I was hearing. “It’s Daisy!”