

PART 2



CHAPTER ONE

Dani, Pax, Eva, Kez, and Amy stood in Foxtale Forest, hearts pounding. The colors of the trees swirled and shimmered. A lovely smell filled the air, like campfires and fresh bread and rainstorms.

“Are you ready for an adventure?” the Fox asked again.

The girls glanced at one another. Dani and Amy shared eager nods, while Kez and Eva couldn’t hide their nervous expressions. Pax just stared at the Fox, delighted by the way his red fur glowed in the light of the trees.

“You said there wasn’t much time, Mr. Fox,” said Pax.

“Yes! Let’s go!” said Amy.

“Who needs our help?” asked Kez. “I don’t see anyone here but us.”

The Fox bobbed his head. “That’s because they *aren’t* here. Foxtale Forest is where all stories *start*,” he said. He pointed his nose at the trees, “But once a story takes root, it grows beyond what you can see. Follow me!”

He leapt from his perch between two golden trunks and trotted forward, deeper into the woods. Pax was first to follow, then Dani. The others trailed behind in an excited clump, eyes wide as they passed between the shining branches.

“I’m a little nervous,” whispered Eva. “This feels impossible!”

“Me too,” Amy whispered back, climbing over a huge tree root, “It’s all pretty weird, but it’s exciting too. That’s the best kind of weird.”

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“I think he’s a friendly fox,” said Eva.

Amy nodded. “Me too.”

If the Fox heard them whispering, he didn’t show it. He simply continued to scamper ahead, his tail waving like a flag.

In a few minutes, they stopped in front of the largest tree Amy had ever seen. It was wider than a grown man and so tall that Dani and the others couldn’t see where the trunk ended and the branches began. The bark was a dusty, golden-red color, like a sunset in summer. It was covered in huge whorls and knots and bumps.

But...something wasn’t quite right with this tree. Other trees in Foxtale Forest were bright and glowing with color. This tree had patches and streaks of dark gray on its bark, as if parts of it had died...or been singed by fire.

“Here we are,” said the Fox. He sighed, staring up at the red bark and its dark gray marks. Something about his face seemed a little sad. “This is a very old story,” he said. “And I love it very much. But it needs help if it is going to keep growing strong.”

He turned and looked at Pax, Dani, Eva, Kez, and Amy.

“First, remember that you each bring something special to this story, something to help it grow,” he continued. “Second, never underestimate the power of kindness to turn the wind. And third, remember that I’m never far off...even if you can’t see me.”

“Wait,” said Dani, “Where are we going now? Aren’t you coming with us?”

The Fox twitched his ears. “Sometimes, for a tale to grow taller, it is better for me to hide in plain sight. But never forget that I’m always nearby.”

“Ughhh,” groaned Kez. “Time out!”

Everyone looked at Kez. She sighed, kicking at a gray leaf



on the ground. “I still don’t get it,” Kez said to the Fox. “You keep saying *stories*. But all I see are a bunch of glowing trees. How do we help a tale to grow tall?” Kez glanced at the four other girls. “We’re not gardeners!”

Eva nodded. “I’m confused too,” she said softly. “I’ve never read anything about a forest where *stories* grow instead of normal trees...”

The Fox blinked at them, green eyes glowing. “You’ve trusted me this far,” he said. “There is more to this Forest than meets the eye.”

Pax, who had been quiet for some time, walked up to Kez and Eva. She took each of their hands in her own. “I think it will be okay,” she said. “We’ll stick together.”

Amy took Eva’s other hand, nodding. “Yeah,” she smiled, “Together.”

“Everyone, just take some deep breaths,” Dani said. She walked up to Kez, grabbed the taller girl’s hand. She looked at the Fox. “We’ll figure it out. As a team.”

Kez felt the butterflies in her stomach spin and flutter. She was nervous. It felt like the seconds before her soccer coach blew the whistle to start a game. She looked at Dani and Pax. Then she looked at Eva and Amy. Despite their calm words, everyone looked nervous too. *At least I’m not alone*, she thought. “Okaaaay,” she said, “But I—”

Before Kez could finish, the Fox jumped, placing his front paws against the trunk of the huge tree. Then he barked, sharp and authoritative.

At the sound, one of the knots in the huge tree began to shimmer. The wood started to slowly swirl around it, moving like water down a drain. The five girls stood hand-in-hand, staring in shock as the tree’s warm colors grew brighter and brighter. The

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trunk cracked around the knot and a hole appeared.

It was a small hole at first, just big enough for a mouse. But as they watched, it grew wider, wide enough for a squirrel. Then, wide enough for a racoon—or a cat. Before they could guess what was happening, the hole was *big*. Now, it was as large as a doorway and glowing with misty, moon-colored light.

The Fox stood before the glowing tree-trunk door, ears twitching, eyes bright. He waved his tail before Dani. “Hold on,” he said.

For a moment, Dani wasn’t sure what the Fox meant. But then, without thinking, she grabbed the fluffy, white end of the Fox’s tail.

“Don’t let go!” he shouted. Then, the Fox leapt through the glowing doorway.

Dani felt herself pulled swiftly forward, the Fox’s tail in one hand, Kez’s hand held tightly in the other. As the whole Forest began to slide away, the girls tumbled after Dani. They held onto one another for dear life. Like water through a garden hose, they shot through the misty Forest doorway—and into a new story.





CHAPTER TWO

Eva's feet left the mossy ground of Foxtale Forest and, for a moment, she felt weightless. The moon-colored mist swirled, hiding the world. She couldn't even see Pax or Amy. Eva squeezed their hands, and felt a lot better when each girl squeezed back. Then Eva felt pebbly ground crunch beneath her feet. She bounced a little on her toes to keep her balance as the others landed alongside her.

The mist faded, blown away by wind that felt warm and dry. Compared to the air-conditioned halls of the library and the cool shade of the Forest, this new world was bright and hot.

Amy felt like she was standing close to the stove while her mother cooked or like someone had left open the oven door. The air was so parched that Eva wished for a glass of water. Pax coughed at the dust in the air.

Each girl squinted, eyes adjusting from the shade of Foxtale Forest.

They stood on a stony hill, surrounded by a wide, sandy desert. The sun hung low in the sky. Flat, rocky land stretched to the horizon. A few wrinkled, thirsty-looking cacti sprouted between rock-piles the color of rust.

And everything was dry. Dryer than paper, dryer than firewood, dryer than bone.

The Fox was nowhere to be seen.

"What's that?" said Amy pointing to the bottom of the hill.

Eva peered down. There were old wooden buildings hud-

dled together on either side of a wide, dusty road. She could see painted signs on the front of each, but they were still too far away to read. A few people moved around the buildings, wearing dresses and old-fashioned hats.

No one crossed the road.

“Did we go back in time?” asked Dani. “That looks like an *old* kind of town. Like...*really* old.”

“It looks like a town in a Wild West movie,” said Pax. “With cowboys and bandits and coyotes!”

“Guys...” Kez said, frowning at the sky. “I don’t think this is *our* Wild West...” She pointed at a group of clouds traveling slowly across the desert sky toward the town.

At first, Dani thought they were just normal clouds. They were white and fluffy, with pink edges from the setting sun. They changed shape as the wind blew them along. They looked just like the clouds at sunset by the Big Blue at home.

“Hey,” said Amy, “That one looks like an eagle.”

Dani peered up again. Amy was right. The cloud *did* look like an eagle...with proud wings stretching and a sharp, curving beak.

“And that one looks like a big, angry cow,” said Pax, pointing to another cloud. This one had horns and wisps of cloud curled from its nostrils. Almost like it was breathing.

“Clouds don’t *usually* look like that...” said Eva.

Kez nodded, her eyes going wide. “I think the clouds are... alive!”

The girls stared in wonder at the beast-clouds, watching as the cloud-eagle’s gigantic, billowing wings slowly moved up and down. The huge cloud-ox shook its head, horns swinging.

Suddenly, the sky seemed much darker. More quickly than they *should* have, the beastly clouds had moved in front of the setting sun.

The desert felt much colder, too. The wind rose. Dust swirled in tiny whirlwinds around Dani's shoes.

"This doesn't feel very safe," said Eva. "We should go into the town!"

As if in answer, the huge cloud-ox raised a massive hoof and stamped the air.

A moment later, thunder rolled across the desert.

"Run!" shouted Dani. "Into the town!"

The girls scrambled down the hill. It was hard work to keep their footing on the sloping, pebbly ground. Pax tripped on a loose rock. Kez grabbed her hand. Together, they raced down the dusty trail.

Another roll of thunder shook the ground.

"Faster!" shouted Eva.

They ran past tumbleweeds and loose piles of stone. They leapt over dry bushes and clumps of spiny cacti. But no matter how fast they ran, the storm followed, whipping up dust as thunder rumbled at their heels.

Soon the five girls reached the outskirts of the old town. One by one, they ran past a rickety sign that read "Welcome to Plentiful."



"There!" shouted Amy. She pointed to a tall building with a big front porch. Through the swirling dust, Eva could see the words "Mister Pumblewick's Inn," painted above the entrance. Kez and Eva ran up

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