

## PROLOGUE

**Wednesday, June 19, 1991**

Ben watched his mother close the book she'd just finished reading to him. A curl of dark red hair tumbled over her eye and she brushed it away. "*The King's Stilts*," she read from the cover. "Dr. Seuss sure wrote some strange ones, didn't he, babe?"

Ben nodded, but he didn't smile. He'd smiled once already tonight at a funny voice his mother had done while she was reading and one of the sores by his mouth had broken open again.

The bedroom door swung open with a creak. "Sorry I'm late," Ben's father said, shrugging out of his tweed coat and leaning down to kiss his wife. "How you doing, kiddo?" he asked Ben. "Did you see Dr. Logan today?"

Ben nodded again. He yawned and his teeth chattered with a fit of shivering.

Hollace's mouth turned down. "Still running a fever, is he?"

What did Logan say?"

Liza shrugged, but Ben thought his mother looked just as nervous as she had at Dr. Logan's office today. "He checked Ben and Imogene both, head to toe. No further sign of chickenpox on Imogene besides that one sore above her eyebrow, and even that one is fading now, but..."

She gestured at Ben as if to say, See for yourself.

Ben looked solemnly up at his father. "I'm sick enough for both of us."

His father laughed in surprise. His mother smiled too. Ben didn't know what was funny, but he was glad he'd made her smile for real for the first time all day.

"That's a direct quote from Dr. Logan," she agreed. "Imogene took off running like she thought she might get in trouble when Logan asked me if I was sure she had brought home the infection. For being a pediatrician, sometimes he doesn't have the best grasp on how to deal with kids. I considered explaining to Imogene that it wasn't her fault that her grandmother nearly died from the chickenpox virus, but a packed waiting room didn't seem like the best place to lecture a screaming child about hereditary vulnerability to disease."

Hollace reached down and rubbed her neck absently. "I just saw Imogene out on the couch reading. I didn't know a ten-year-old could look so despondent. Did Logan give Ben a prescription?"

"Chicken soup and a lot of sleep," Liza said, standing from the little desk chair she'd sat in while she read. Ben thought she looked pale. "And speaking of sleep, little man, I'm sending your sister in and then you guys need to hit the hay, all right?"

Both of Ben's parents acted ready for him to protest and seemed almost disappointed when he didn't. Sleep sounded very good right now. The only time his body hadn't itched or shivered or just outright hurt in the last week had been while

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he slept.

They left his room, swinging the door almost shut. But they didn't go far. He heard them speaking softly in the hall.

"You look tired," Hollace said. "I'm sorry I couldn't go with you today."

"I know. Why were you so late?" Liza asked, her voice slightly muffled. Ben could picture her leaning her head on his father's shoulder.

"Myra Johns wanted to talk to me."

"Do I know her? The name sounds familiar."

"Franklin's daughter. I had her in Psych 101 as a freshman."

"What'd she want?"

"To talk to you, actually. She's enrolled herself in the Miss Seattle pageant. Hoping to make some scholarship money like you did."

Liza grunted. "And she wanted some tips about what not to say in your onstage interview?"

"Quite the contrary. Apparently she found a film of you in the archives at the university library while she was researching former winners of pageants in the state."

"Good girl. Sounds smart."

"She said she'd heard the things the newspapers said about you after the pageant, but she wondered why she hadn't heard about everything else you said. Your allusions to math and literature."

Ben heard his mother take a deep, calming breath and release it like she did when he and Imogene were tormenting each other, but when she spoke again she didn't sound angry. Just very tired.

"As long as she's aware of the stereotype they'll try to squeeze her into, and that some people can hold onto stereotypes for, what, twenty-three years now?"

"Oh, she's aware of the stereotype. Doing her best to smash

it to pieces with a 4.0 GPA in all of her pre-med classes. I did mention to her that not all of the judges thought you were a dimwit. She loved what the Asian judge said after the show about the force of your will rebounding through the cosmos.”

“If the force of my will rebounded through the cosmos, my babies wouldn’t be sick,” she said.

Ben listened to her slow footfalls travel down the hallway, heard her tell Imogene it was time to brush her teeth. Five minutes later Imogene shuffled into the bedroom, head turned downward. Tangles of red curly hair, so much like their mother’s, hung over her eyes. When she sat down on her bed she finally looked at him.

“I didn’t mean to bring home the infection, Benny.”

He didn’t say anything. He’d never seen his sister so serious before.

“Mom says you need sleep, so I’m going watch you all night and make sure you’re okay.”

She seemed almost ready for him to argue, just as his parents had been ready for him to argue about going to sleep, but he only nodded. Apparently satisfied, she turned and leaned against her bed’s headboard, knees pulled up to her stomach to support the book she had brought in with her.

“You should read the story Mom read to me tonight,” he told her, lifting it off the bedspread and setting it on the stand between their beds. “It’s about a kingdom covered in water where the king walks everywhere on stilts.”

“Go to bed, Benny.”

“And there’s a bad man named Lord Droon who tries to hide the king’s stilts. And he says a little boy who works for the king has measles and locks him away. Measles are like chicken pox,” he clarified wisely.

“Don’t scratch,” Imogene said. “Doctor says you’ll get Frankenstein scars.”

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He'd been raking away at the little orange scabs on the side of his neck without even realizing it. He dropped his hand, trying not to sulk.

"I just thought you might like the book."

"I'll read it if you go to sleep," she sighed. "We can talk about it in the morning, okay?"

"If you want," he said lightly, trying to mask his relief.

He knew Dr. Seuss was for littler kids than he was, but *The King's Stilts* had scared him. One picture in particular, of Lord Droon in his black robe and black hat with the little wire sticking out of it, refused to leave his mind. Ben had asked his mother if she thought Droon had a radio hidden under his hat. She had laughed and said there weren't radios back when kings lived in big stone castles, and even if there had been, a radio under your hat would be pretty uncomfortable. Ben had pretended to laugh too, moving his lips as little as possible, but it hadn't changed the simple fact that he didn't like Lord Droon. He didn't like the mysterious wire in his hat or the black goatee that jutted from his chin like the point of a knife.

Ben vaguely heard Imogene trade the book in her hand for the one his mother had read and slide back onto the bed. That was good. He didn't know if she would be afraid of Droon also, but even if she was, being afraid together was better than being afraid alone. Maybe she would even have an explanation for that creepy wire...

His eyes flew open. He had no idea if he'd been asleep for five minutes or five hours. The little lamp on the nightstand between his bed and Imogene's was still on, and he tilted his head to the left to see if she was still awake.

Despite her promise to watch him all night, she had fallen asleep. She was still sitting up, head resting heavily against the tops of her knees. But Ben registered these details distantly. A

third person in their room was taking up all of his attention.

I'm still asleep, he thought wildly, eyes darting from the little man's carefully trimmed goatee to the gleaming, needle-thin silver wire sticking up from the band of his hat. Of course I am. I don't even itch.

And he didn't. Not his arms or his neck or the wide patch of skin above of his butt that had itched relentlessly for the last two days. But this realization gave him little comfort. All of the other too-real details in his room—the wadded Kleenexes on Imogene's bedspread (she must have started crying again after he fell asleep), the box of Transformers in the corner beside the wooden writing desk he shared with his sister—told him he was wide awake. This was nothing like his typical good dreams of marrying Theodora Lilly from school or even the bad ones where he ran panicked through a darkened house, flipping light switches that never turned on.

The small man in the chair, grinning widely, shook his head as if to concur that Ben certainly was not dreaming. The grin made Ben feel more scared because the Lord Droon in the Dr. Seuss book had never grinned at all. Of course, the Droon in the book also hadn't looked Chinese like this one did.

"Your mother and your sister are very upset," Lord Droon said. His voice sounded like it was coming from a TV in another room: tinny and a little fuzzy.

"I'm sick enough for us both," Ben told him in a shaking whisper he hardly recognized as his own.

Droon nodded enthusiastically. "You would like to get better? For your mother and your sister as well as for yourself?"

The man coughed suddenly and the bedroom filled with a smell like burned matches.

"I don't itch right now," Ben whispered.

"Indeed not," Droon said. "Even so, you are still very sick.

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You may die from your illness.”

His long fingered hands gently lifted Imogene’s pink diary from the writing desk. The diary had originally been very thin, but Imogene had stuffed it with folded school notes, movie tickets, stickers, and ribbons from school contests. The whole mess was held together by a simple plastic lock Ben had opened countless times with a paperclip.

“There is a piece of paper in this diary that can make you better. Don’t you think your sister would trade that one small thing if it could make you healthy again?”

Ben was starting to think he might be dreaming after all. He remembered his father saying that people usually dreamed about whatever had been in their minds when they fell asleep. Well, Lord Droon had been foremost in Ben’s mind, and here he was, asking for a page out of Imogene’s diary. In fact, Imogene would probably enjoy hearing about this dream in the morning, as long as he remembered not to mention that he’d opened her diary all those times.

Droon grasped the square corner of a piece of pink notebook paper and slid it upward, out of the diary’s closed pages.

“Hey, my sister didn’t write that one,” Ben protested as Droon unfolded the page. “It’s a letter from her penpal in Phoenix.”

“Dulcinea Montero de Frutas,” Droon read from the bottom of the letter. “Your sister’s penpal has a lovely name.”

“You sure that’s the one you want? There’s better stuff in there.”

Droon nodded slowly, his eyes darting across the page.

“Well, just don’t tell Gene I said you could have it,” Ben said, figuring he might as well cover his tracks, dream or not.

Droon’s grin widened. “Agreed.” He delicately refolded the pink notebook paper and slipped it into the inner breast

pocket of his black jacket. "Sleep now. We wish you a speedy recovery."

Ben's eyelids suddenly drooped. Could you fall asleep in a dream?

"Thanks," he yawned. "See you later."

Droon coughed again, but this time Ben was too close to sleep to care much about the smell.

"Yes," he rasped at the edge of Ben's consciousness. "You will."