

# *The Door in the Woods*

“Ah, crap.” Joe Bob cursed as he sucked his wounded thumb. The barbed wire coil that had inflicted his grievous wound rattled as it came together under tension, seemingly laughing at him. With a sigh, Joe slid his hand back into the thick leather glove that was supposed to protect him against the barbs. Muttering about the lousy staples in rotted posts, Joe went back to coiling the wire. He had been almost a week on his grandparents’ tree farm, working on fences that were down after the logging company had come through. It was nothing but a pain for Joe, as snarls of wire, shattered posts and torn stumps and piles of debris in the clear cut areas. Joe had almost cried when he had come back to the tree farm after the company had come through, his favorite place in the world lay in ruins, trails he had blazed through tough thicket and clear running stream, destroyed.

A rustle in the brush across from the property road interrupted his melancholy thoughts. A small smile played at his lips as Joe looked up from the wire. “Abigail, is that you?” He asked the wind jovially. The rustling grew more pronounced as whatever was stalking him came closer. “Come on Abby, just a little further now.” Joe coaxed. The coil of barbed wire lay forgotten on the ground as Joe stared hard at the ferns that stood tall and proud on the edge of the road across from him. The rustling died down.

Joe waited for a few more minutes, and then turned back to his work. He had made it his goal to have all the wire down in one week. Unfortunately, it was taking much longer. It had been some time since the thinning and clear cut had been made, and the underbrush had exploded with the fresh sunlight reaching the forest floor. Thick clumps of salmonberry and Oregon grape made walking impossible without a machete or brush mower, while small holly trees prickled the unwary that walked close to them. Wild raspberries and blackberries were not about to be outdone by their competitors, and where the salmonberry wasn’t, they were. All in all, it made it miserable pulling fencing. Joe had spent the first five days simply clearing underbrush with a brush hog and special attachments for his edger to get under the fence. It didn’t get it all, but it certainly made walking around easier!

It was during this time that he realized he wasn’t alone while working on the fence. He had first heard her just like now, rustling in the underbrush. She had made so much noise, his first thought had been a large deer or something that had gotten lost and was wandering by him. Later, he caught glimpses of something much smaller than a deer darting through the thickets on the far side of the road that

marked his family's property line. Then, while he was operating his edger and making a terrible racket, he had turned around and started when he had seen her. She had looked at him inquisitively, and watched with keen interest as he shut off the machine and stared at her. After spending a few minutes seeing what she would do, Joe had turned back to his work. She stayed with him, and followed as he took wire to his truck and back. She was there all day, and the next as well. Joe had come to look forward to her arrival each day as he set up work.

The rustling in the brush grew louder, and Joe looked over his shoulder to watch her come. The ferns started to shake, and then Abbey stepped out. "Hello Abby." Joe greeted her, raising his hand and waving. "I'm a little busy now, but you can tag along if you'd like." The grouse tilted her head and raised the crest of feathers on her head. It's strange, Joe mused, how she seemed to understand every word he said to her. She'd even talk back, if she was in the mood too. Indeed, Abby trilled a greeting as she walked up to him, bobbing her head like a chicken. Her mottled brown feathers hid a splash of blue in a ring around her neck, and her feet were all white. Something Joe had not expected. Of course, what did he know of bird's feet anyway? It's not like he made a study of them!

Abbey watched as he continued to coil the barbed wire, being careful not to puncture his glove this time. She walked even closer behind this time, and Joe cast worried glances back to make sure he knew where she was. After all, Joe didn't want to step on her by accident! "What are you doing, silly girl?" He asked as she almost trod on his foot. This grouse had no survival instinct about her whatsoever. He didn't think she had a nest nearby as it was late in the year, almost November in fact, and most birds had their young in spring.

Abbey looked up at him, and then quickly and deliberately pecked his foot. "Hey!" Joe yelped. The beak never penetrated his jeans, let alone his boot, but it had been quick and sudden. What was going on? "Abbey, what on earth are you doing?" Joe turned around to glare at her. Abbey darted back the way she had come, cocked her head at him and stared. Joe muttered about insolent birds as he turned back to his work, only to feel her beak peck against the same foot!

"All right bird." He glared. "It's time for you to go!" Grabbing a small stick, he placed it crosswise in front of him and began striding forward. Abby seemed to glare at him as he tried to herd her away. She stood her ground defiantly and pushed back against his stick. Joe felt the weight of the bird as she tried to lean into it, but it was no contest against his strength. Step by step, she gave way until he had her near the

edge of the road. "Go on now, girl. You need to go." Joe commented. Giving her one last push, he got her into the ferns then turned back to his work.

He had barely gone three steps when he heard her hop back out of the bush, and when he walked to the coil of wire he was working on, she darted around him to stand on it. "Abby!" Joe groaned. "I'm trying to work here, don'tcha know!" Birds! Joe again herded her off his wire and back into the woods across the road.

Now irritable, Joe pulled out his grandfather's pocket watch and checked the time. 2:45 P.M., a good time for lunch, Joe thought. Replacing the watch into his pocket, his fingers slipped and the watch fell, dangling near the large rocks that made the roadbed. Joe let out the breath he had been holding shakily. Thank god the watch had such a long chain on it! Unfortunately, Joe noticed that it was snarled around his belt again. Wondering if anything would go his way today, Joe set about untangling it. When the last link was free of his clothing, he went about resetting the clip on his belt. A powerful yank jerked it out of his fingers and he stared dumbly at where they had been before turning around to see Abby's tail disappearing into the woods on the far side of the road. "Abby! Come back here with that!" Joe shouted. He plunged in after her.

The woods on the far side had a great deal of pine and maple closely entwined, shading out the understory and making it easier to see the grouse just ahead of him. Dead limbs and larger branches clutched at his flannel shirt, and loose leaf litter crunched loudly underfoot. Fallen timber blocked his trail a couple of times, but he quickly clambered over it, determined not to lose Abigail. For her part, Abs would wait for him to almost catch up, and then dart away. Joe got the feeling that she was playing with him, but why he couldn't figure out. It wasn't exactly like he had encouraged her!

Joe darted around the coarse trunk of a hemlock, and stopped. Abby was standing a foot away, head twisted to look at him, pocket watch dangling from her beak. "Now Abby," Joe said slowly, trying not to frighten her into running again. "I want you to put down the watch. Can you do that for me? Just put down the watch." As he spoke, Joe began easing into a crouching position. If he got low enough and she tried to run, he might be able to jump forward and tackle her. Abby seemed to smile at him for a moment, and then she jerked her head sideways and opened her mouth. His pocket watch sailed into a hole in the ground at the base of the stump that the hemlock was growing on. "Now girl, why'd you do that?!" Joe groaned in frustration.

Keeping his heavy glove on, Joe lay flat in front of the stump and eased his hand into the hole. He desperately hoped that anything in the hole would be unable to penetrate the heavy leather. His questing fingers found no sign of the watch. How far had the bird thrown it in there?! Joe growled a curse and leaned forward. Wait, was that it? His fingers found something clearly unnatural. It was long and round. What was it? Giving a yank to see if it would come loose, Joe was stunned to hear a click that echoed in the air around him. "What the—?"

A low rumbling filled the air, and Joe yanked his hand out of the hole and began to push up, trying to run. The earth crumbled beneath him, and Joe let out a yell as he plunged into darkness. He fell three or four feet before landing painfully on the ground. "Ow." Joe muttered. He lay on the ground for a moment, deciding whether anything was truly broken before getting up. His chest felt like a mass of bruises and his wrists felt sore, but he was pretty certain nothing was broken. Getting to his feet, Joe muttered balefully about levers and secret doors that opened up beneath folk like some cartoon shows with a large canine in them. On his feet, he looked up and saw the tree in front of him. Running his gaze downward to see what he had fallen in, he was surprised to see a door under the rotted stump. It was fairly big, large enough for him certainly, although he would have to bend over, and set at a slight angle. Gleaming bronze hinges held the door in its frame while a knob of similar color was set in the other door. There was no keyhole. "How is this possible?" Joe whispered. He felt a chill climb his spine, there was no way those knobs and hinges looked like that after being underground, it was unnatural!

A flutter of wings made him jump, heart racing. It was only Abby. She landed in front of him, watch dangling from her beak. She set it down in front of his boot and rubbed his ankle with her head. "What's going on Abs?" Joe asked. She trilled at him. "No, no more excuses. What is going on?" Joe demanded. She trilled again. *I'm talking to a bird*, a corner of Joe's brain realized. Not sure now how stable his grip on reality was, Joe reclaimed his pocket watch and stared at the door. Abby trilled again and ran to it, glancing back at him. "All right, I'm coming." *I'm taking directions from a bird. And I thought I was going nuts before!*

Smiling, Joe reached out for the handle and turned it. Delightfully, it turned with an easy click, much like opening the front door to his house. Pulling slightly, he tested the resistance of the door. He felt his eyebrows climb up, the door hardly budged! Grasping the knob with both hands, he tried again. This time he felt the door give a little. Abby warbled, cheering him on. "I know, this thing is stuck. Give me a minute." Joe said impatiently. Beads of sweat were starting to pop out on his brow as he set his feet and

gave one last effort. The door stubbornly held, but he felt it giving way, and he threw everything he had into it. The door popped free and swung open, almost tumbling him over. Behind it was a dark tunnel. “Now, where does this go?” Joe asked. Abby trilled nervously at him. “Hey, you’re the one who brought me here. Don’t chicken out on me now!” Joe laughed. Abby squawked indigently and hopped over to his foot. Bending slightly, Joe entered the tunnel with Abigail pressing close.

The inside of the tunnel was dark and slightly damp feeling. Joe reached up to the brim of his hat and pushed the button on its side. Light flared from the LEDs stitched into the cap. It wasn’t much, but it lit up the tunnel nicely. The walls seemed to glitter slightly, and Joe brushed them lightly with his fingers. The soft earth crumbled slightly at his touch, and he backed up. Joe wondered what was keeping the tunnel from collapsing, then decided he really didn’t want to know. The farther away from the entrance he got, the higher his anxiety levels became. The tunnel widened and became taller, allowing him to stand upright comfortably. With a sigh of relief, Joe turned round and looked back the way he came. Was it his imagination, or was it lighter that way? Probably was, he couldn’t have gone all that far from the entrance. The question was, should he press on?

Abigail trilled as Joe stood trying to decide. “Easy, Abby. I’m trying to decide whether we should go on or head back.” Joe said absently. A sharp clicking sound interrupted his thoughts, and he looked down. Abigail was pecking at something on the ground. Joe thought it sounded like a rock, but decided to have a look anyway. Shooing the bird to the side, Joe began brushing the dirt away. His brow furrowed, it was very bright, reflecting the light from his hat so that he could barely make it out. Running questing fingers on either side, he decided to remove his gloves so that he could get a good grip on it. Yanking hard, the object popped free. “Okay, it’s free. Let’s get out of here.” Shooing the bird with his hands, Joe collected his gloves and headed back up the tunnel.

Outside in the hole, Joe stood gratefully to his full six foot height and heard his back pop slightly. Setting the object on the ground next to the hole, Joe grasped the sides and pulled himself up to his waist. Straightening his legs, he rolled until he was on the ground. Gasping slightly from the effort, he spun around and stuck his hand down in the hole for Abigail. She gave him a slightly dirty look, and flapped her wings, alighting in a tree. Chuckling at her antics, Joe turned to get his first good look at what he had pulled out from the hole.

It was a chunk of yellowed rock almost as tall as his forearm and twice as thick. That explained why it had seemed so heavy back in the tunnel. It was pretty good sized! It was cut into a many sided pyramid

with an octahedral base. Joe picked it back up and studied it. He thought it might have been amber, but wasn't sure. Then he peered inside it and almost dropped it in shock. A miniature face stared back at him, her expression one of despair. Her medium-length brown hair swirled around her head like she was swimming in water and frozen. Her arms were in front of her, pleading with him. Her body was clothed in what appeared to be a flowing robe, patterned with what looked like, yes, they were tiny waves. The most shocking thing about her though, was the large transparent wings that came out her back. They seemed almost like a cross between a butterfly's wings and a dragonfly, broad and transparent, but with a look of speed to them.

Joe stared at the image trapped in amber. He was pretty sure that he was glassy-eyed from shock. There could be no way that there was a fairy trapped inside a carved amber rock. Just no way. Abby's sad trill broke into his mind, and he stared uncomprehendingly at her. "You knew about this didn't you?" Joe asked her. She just stared back at him and warbled at him. "Don't try to play innocent with me." Joe almost snarled. Shock was giving way to anger. He had been used, by a bloody grouse! Not a noble eagle or wise owl, but a bloody grouse! He wasn't really sure why he was angry, he just was. "I know that you know about this, and now I need to know."

Abby scolded him from her tree, and then flapped off in a hissy fit. "Figures." Joe muttered. "Raise your voice at them, and it's suddenly all your fault. Typical." He turned the stone over in his hands. "Now, what do I do with you?" he wondered. A chance glance at the sun made him frown; it was farther down than he had thought! He checked his pocket watch and let out a curse. He had about an hour before the sun set. He'd have to hurry. Taking the rock with its precious cargo with him, he started running to his worksite. Along the way, he wondered what to make of this new enigma, and what it might lead to.

## ***Chapter 1***

### ***The Fairie***

Joe left the worksite with the curious piece of Amber tucked in his pocket. It's comforting weight stretched the huge pocket of his coat to the seams. Joe wondered if it would simply snap, and hoped that it wouldn't