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Chapter 1

Sickness

Mark kept his ear close to the door, remaining completely still as he listened to the conversation taking place in the hall. He could hear the frustrated tones of the doctor speaking slowly to his frightened and weeping parents.

"I'm sorry. There's nothing we can do at this point but make her comfortable. The illness is...just...too much for your daughter."

"Please doctor." His mother's tearful plea came. "Isn't there anything we can do? Go to the hospital again...some sort of cure might —"

"I wish it were so." Interrupted the doctor. Mark balled his hand into a fist to keep from shouting. He was the doctor, he had to know! "But, there is nothing, even today, that can cure this. Even were we to take her to the hospital now, all they could do is what we are doing now, giving her painkillers and what little medicine she needs. The rest...is up to her now."

"What do you mean?" His father's deeper voice demanded. "Are you telling me that there's nothing. That all the wonders of modern medicine and you can't cure my sick daughter?"

"Yes, Mr. Felson. I'm afraid that's exactly what I am saying." The doctor soothed. "Just try to be with her. Maybe...just maybe she can come back."

"What are the chances of that?"

"Almost none." The doctor finished quietly.

Mark backed away from the door, his vision blurring. He didn't need to hear his parents wish the doctor a good night. He had as much as he needed to know right now. He didn't even notice his darkened room around him as he stumbled to bed, laying on top of the covers. Folding his hands behind his head, he stared at the pale white ceiling above him, trying to sort through his emotions and solve the problem laid before him.

His sister Mary was six years older than him, a fact she rubbed in often. Being sixteen, she was allowed to stay out longer, hang out with her friends and even have her own computer. Mark never minded, however. Computers struck him as being just too boring, why play games on a flat screen when you could live them in your mind through a good book? Plus, when he did need one, his sister let him borrow hers. She never teased him about his skinny height (he was the tallest boy in class) or laughed at his hair (he could never keep it combed). She never bossed him around like other sisters, and often helped him with his homework or with whatever problem that puzzled him. He rarely could ask his parents, being lawyers they were away from the house most of the time. In some ways, he felt closer to his sister than he did to the woman who gave birth to him. Now his best friend in the whole world lay in the next room, slowly slipping away.

The doctor said she needed something, a reason to live. Something that would bring her back to him. Mark thought hard about all the things Mary had ever said to him about what she wanted: A good man, a new car, a pair of kids, but all of it seemed to him unobtainable. Most of the stuff she always talked about was in the future, when she would be out of the house and living on her own. There *had* to be something though.

A fragment of a long forgotten conversation floated up to him. Back when Mark had to be about five, and Mary just eleven. She had picked up a large glitter book on fairies and sighed. Mark, interested in his sister's slightly dopey expression, peeked over her shoulder to see what his big sister would find so captivating.

"F-f-fair-ee-ee-es?" He sounded the strange word out loud. He was just starting to get the hang of most words, but new ones threw him.

Mary looked back at him, startled. "Oh, yes!" she gushed. "I've always wanted to meet one! They're magic, you see, and very shy—" For the next hour she told him about fairy movies she had seen and books she had read, but Mark had let his attention wander. He certainly hadn't been all that interested in little bug-women with antennae. Mary must have noted this, because she never brought up the subject again with him.

Now, a ten-year old Mark felt the word slide over his lips. "Fairies." It seemed like a promise. He nodded to himself. "So be it."

Mark left his house early the next morning, even though it was a Saturday. He pinned a note on the fridge for his mom telling him that he was going to the library to search for something to help Mary. He neglected to tell her exactly what he was searching for, but soothed his conscious by telling himself that it wasn't *exactly* a lie either.

The Oddville library stood near the center of town, just short of City Hall and a couple of downtown businesses. A flagpole was placed near the sidewalk in front of the dirty grey stone building, the American flag hanging limp in the still air. Ascending the broad marble steps, Mark entered the plain glass doors.

The thick stone walls shut out much of the noise from outside, leaving only a quiet murmur from people speaking in barely a whisper. Mark made his way to the main desk, recognizing the librarian manning the register.

"Good morning, missus Phelps." He said politely.

"Well, good morning Mark." The elderly woman smiled at him from behind gold glasses. "You're here awfully early."

"Yes." Mark agreed. "I am. I'm searching for any book on fairies." He spoke the last words quietly, hoping not to be overheard by anyone.

"Ah. Something for your sister then." Mrs. Phelps said equally softly. She chuckled at his surprise. "Your sister used to be in here every other week, looking for something on fairies. Any new book we got she made sure to get just to read. That was a couple of years ago now, but I still remember." She frowned. "Unfortunately, I'm pretty sure she's read all the stuff we've gotten, there hasn't been anything in some time, but you could look through, I'm sure."

Mark thanked her, and after getting directions to the section containing the largest collection, he left. Once there, he found dozens of titles. FAIRY TALES AND OTHER NONSENSE spoke one title. MELODY AND THE FAIRY, AMY AND THE FAIRY COSTUME fairly leaped off the shelves at him. They weren't anything like what he was looking for however. These were all fantasy stories, he wanted something that presented facts. A couple of books came to him, ALL ABOUT FAIRIES and another: THE WORLD OF THE FAIRY. But they were new, and full of obvious nonsense.

Every book Mark found, he took off the shelf and brought to a small reading desk that had been provided in a small corner. There he pored over the tomes, leaving only a small notebook beside him, and occasionally scribbling notes doubtfully on its pages. Morning passed into late afternoon like this, Mark hardly noticed the discomfort at this point. A strange determination fell over him, it was as if he knew the next book he found would hold the answer.

"The next book. The next book." He muttered to himself as he pulled another book off the shelf to bring back to his desk, read through, before returning it dejectedly to the file cart. He filled several already, and the librarians were now starting to mutter to themselves at the work he was making for them.

"What is he looking for?" he overheard one whisper to her friend as she started replacing a fresh batch of books he had placed neatly a few minutes before.

"I don't know." He replied. "But I am getting tired of holding all these fairy books and putting them back. He's got to get bored soon."

Mark just shook his head, they didn't understand his mission, and he wasn't about to enlighten them either. He knew what they would think, and who they might call.

Only Mrs. Phelps, who stayed long after her shift was supposedly over, acted any different. She stayed at the counter where she could keep an eye on him, occasionally admonishing one of the frustrated librarians that wanted to shoo him away.

Afternoon wore away to evening, and most of the patrons had left, except Mark who still tore through book after book, searching for just that one he needed. He was just reaching up to take another book off the shelf when a hand fell against his shoulder, giving him a start! Mark turned to see Mrs. Phelps behind him, looking worried.

"Missus Phelps! You startled me." He gasped, trying to control his breathing.

"Mark, what are you looking for?" She asked him directly. She was not smiling.

Mark dug one toe into the carpet, trying to cover the guilty glance he stole to yet another full book cart sitting near the aisle that he had filled.

“Just something for my sister.” He responded evasively. She gave him a look; one that meant he knew she wasn’t buying it and had half a mind to talk to his mother about it. He quickly gave in.

“Mary is very sick. He whispered miserably. “The doc says she needs a reason to live. And I’m apparently not enough of one.” He added bitterly.

“Mark!” Mrs. Phelps spoke severely. “You know that isn’t true! Mary loves you very much.”

“I know.” Mark caught the sob before it left his throat. “But maybe I can get her to come back if...if I catch a real fairy for her.”

There it was. The real reason he had come to the library. Mark felt very foolish the moment it was out of his mouth, he wished he could take it back.

“Mark, you know that isn’t possible right?” Mrs. Phelps said gently, like the time he was six and had a book fall on his head, threatening to cry right then and there until she took him by the hand and spoke to him like she was doing now and calmed him down.

“I won’t know until I try.” Mark said stubbornly. He had come too far to quit now!

Mrs. Phelps sighed. “Alright Mark. Come with me.” She turned and began walking towards the back. Surprised, Mark trotted along behind, pausing only to grab his bag and supplies from the desk. Their path led through several aisles of books, as they still walked towards the back of the library. Mark noticed that the farther along they went, the dustier the books seemed, some not appearing to have moved from their places in years. Finally, they stopped near a locked bookcase. Mark felt fresh surprise at this; he had had no idea there were any books locked up at all.

“This is our very rare book section.” Mrs. Phelps explained as she fished a small and curious key from the pocket of her dress. It had a small golden barrel and a twisted knot for a handle. She placed it in a similarly golden lock on the case and twisted. A soft click sounded, and the door slid open easily at her touch.

“I’ve only looked here a couple of times,” she admitted. “There’s so few books of this caliber here, almost all of them were donated by...well, that’s not important. The fact is that no one really knows what is here anymore, it’s been so long since they were even asked after.”

Mark felt tremendous excitement. At last, a real possible lead! An unlikely one, he admitted to himself, but still. He thanked Mrs. Phelps and commenced to peering at the dusty spines carefully, while she hovered nearby.

After what seemed an age, Mark was ready to give up in disappointment. There were books on all kinds of nature, from the Congo to the Himalayas. All of them could be separated into two categories: research material, and journals. Of the two, Mark found the journals most intriguing. They were written by a heavy, scholarly hand of some bygone age, and referenced travels and accounts from all corners of the earth it seemed, most notably Africa. But all of them appeared to cover only mundane animals and wonders.

Mark placed the last journal back to its spot, feeling incredibly disappointed, when he noticed a slim book tucked against the wall behind another journal. Grasping its tattered leather spine, he drew it slowly out. Turning it, he looked at the title written in gold letters above a golden impression of a small woman with thin, veiny wings like a dragonfly's, from her back:

THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF FAIREYS AND THEIR HABITS.

This was it, this was exactly what he was looking for. Mark's hands shook as he carefully opened the cover and peered at the leaf. Inside was the name of the other journal's author, a Dr. Al Driscoll.

"This is it." He whispered. He looked up at Mrs. Phelps. "This is exactly what I was looking for. Can I check it out, please?!"

"I'm sorry Mark, but these books are supposed to stay in the library. They're very rare." Mrs. Phelps said contritely.

A setback! Mark glanced down at the volume he held, already planning on how to squeeze in time to study the pages thoroughly.

Mrs. Phelps obviously guessed what was going through his mind, because she sighed.

"All right Michael. I can see that you're going to be in here every day for this book already, and I'm not sure I approve. However, if you guarantee you'll take care of the book, I can let you borrow it for a normal time, one week."

“Thank you.” Mark whispered. He knew what a horrible risk his mother’s friend was running for him, and he was touched by her offer to help.

“You won’t be disappointed.” He vowed.

“That’s alright Marcus.” Mrs. Phelps smiled. “I know you won’t. These books have been pretty much forgotten by everyone. Heck, I was surprised they didn’t go out with the last book sale. I don’t think anyone would honestly mind, but let’s not tempt things, shall we?”

“Of course.” Mark agreed numbly. He followed her to the front, where Mrs. Phelps carefully applied a check-out tag to the inside cover with the due date carefully applied, and sent him on his way.

