

# Chapter 1

There's that light again. I've seen it for the last three nights, flashing across my laptop screen, a burst of sparkle exploding through the glass. The first night, I thought a drone light might be creating a strange reflection. Last night, I guessed fireworks. Tonight, I'm thinking it's a light show for the party. *Ba-bum-ba-bum. Thrum. Thrum.* The beat of the music outside pulses against my window, but nothing on the terrace looks like a band's light display. Instead, everything's dimly lit—just strands of silver globes laced among the trees and electric torches lighting the pathways.

I confront my laptop. Something must be wrong with it. My hand reaches toward it, and then jerks away as if touching a key will zap me with strange electric current. The thought of losing my machine to a system crash leaves me desolate. These past two months it's just been me, sitting here, alone with my Mac, loading photos, tweaking their pixels, embedding them into my digital art. Yes, my art, my photos—no, I can't lose my work. It's time to start a backup.

A whoop from a musician announces the end of a set. There's a final roll of the drums and a pathetic smattering of applause. That's embarrassing, no one's listening, but even so, it's good to have the music stop. Still, all that chatter from the crowd, punctuated by some tipsy shrieks, propels me into an ugly mood, one that's cranky and raw.

Glaring out the window at the party mob—strangers who know Margot and Dad—I delete them as a source of potential links. I haven't had a real conversation since we moved here in June, but I could never imagine speaking to any of them, especially that woman drunk-dancing through the garden bed. *Stomp, stomp, stomp.* She's crushing coneflower petals into the earth as if

it's her favorite game.

Ugh. She's what's wrong. Her! Them! Making my night so utterly wrecked! They overflow the nooks and crannies and surge up my stairs, defying gravity, forcing me to lock my door against them. They're why I'm not down on the terraces, gossiping about the next big deal or the latest fad diet or what someone's shoulder bag cost. Instead, I'm up here, staying put.

That woman's driving me crazy, still stomping her way through the greenery. Grabbing my camera, I storm down the hall to perch on the balcony overlooking our garden. It seethes with the party crush, people swarming the pathways, just ants in their nest. Behind them stand the tall Doug firs, watchers like me. I breathe in their evergreen scent, fresh in the warm summer's air, and for a moment, I tower like the trees, capturing a bit of their magic until it vanishes.

The woman plows through some rose beds. Focusing my lens, I wait until she flattens a coral zinnia. *Click. Click.* Photographic evidence. For what? Who knows? But it's a victory, a small one, in a night of dismal feelings, wishing I were forty miles away.

We just moved to Mossy Hills from Portland in June, and the party is a housewarming for this brand-new, monster mansion. My dad paid millions to have it built, but why? It's designed boxy-modern but trimmed in rustic touches that clash like pickles and cake. It's nothing like our Portland place, a restored Craftsman bungalow, expanded but still cozy with a wide front porch and wood-wrapped windows. That was a real home. I lived there my whole life, seventeen years. Mom never would have let Dad sell it, and so I'm boycotting this ugly house, this dreadful party.

My camera sweeps the terrace until it spies Margot, my stepmother. The lens frames her milky face, pale like her bleach-blonde hair. There's something sad-banshee about her eyes as she scans the crowd, desperate to find someone—hopefully not me. I stand still as the trees. No luck. She heads in my direction.

Swaying below me like she's already over her limit, she calls, "Kaye, come down. I want you to meet someone. She'll be a senior at Moss High this year like you."

"No." My glare pierces the shadows around her. "And it's Mossy *Hills* High."

Hands on her hips, her mouth pinches. "You can't keep doing this. You need to get established. Meet people. Make a good impression."

My eyes become two daggers. My camera grip is extra firm. Her life is one big phony impression that doesn't mean a damn thing, so I'm already breathing fire when she says, "You've got to learn to make connections."

A plastic cup full of stale soda balances on the balcony railing. With the flick of my finger, it splashes down beside her, a near miss. Spinning away, I knock over a tall, empty planter. It's brass, so it clangs like a cymbal. Kicking it aside, I tip a painting sideways as it hangs in the hallway—just to piss Margot off. Slamming through my bedroom door, I lock it tight and march across the room, ready to shut my windows against the heat of the night.

A laugh stops me. It's not deep, but still earthy, a generous laugh that spreads like warm molasses. It could be my brother's laugh, but it's not. It echoes through me as I search for Marty's impish face among the party crowd, just in case the impossible has happened. Just in case he's here.

Turning to my laptop, I tap a key to wake it up. No electric shock. No puzzling light. It's safe. Whatever the problem was, it's gone, and the backup has finished, so I scroll through all my laptop files, looking for photos of my brother. There's one from the night of his big blowout seven years ago before heading off to college, the night he gave me his old camera. *Take photos*, he said, *post them so I know what's happening*. This picture of him is surprisingly good for my rookie ten-year-old attempt. He's dancing, hands to the sky as if sparks shoot from his fingertips, his eyes ablaze, bright as the stars.

Searching my phone for a voicemail saved from Marty—sometimes I play it just to hear his voice again—I tap the screen to listen, but the phone *dings*.

A text comes in. It's from a Craigslist ad for a car. *Do you still want the Honda?*

I text back: *If it runs, yes.*

*\$2500. Firm.*

*That's fine. When?*

*Tomorrow at 10 AM.*

*Where?*

*Mossy Hills DMV. Bring cash. Look for the car. I'll park toward the back. I'm Herman.*

*How about 10:30 so I can get to the bank?*

*Sure.*

*Send the pix again.*

A photo comes through. It's a small white hatchback. There are some scrape marks below the right front headlight. *It's perfect. See u then.*

My next move is to check my bank balance. "Hey, Mom," I whisper, "there's just enough." Technically, it's Dad's money, but I always think of it as Mom's money because she's the one that demanded it—an allowance every month going straight to my bank account. "She's got to learn about money," Mom insisted. She even made me do chores for it. Wisely, she wrote it into her will. Dad can't disappear it in a stormy fit.

With a smirk, I lock my phone. Dad will be furious. He just bought me an Audi coupe, brand new. It's metallic red. Bleh. And he didn't even let me choose the color! I can't see myself driving around town, calling attention to my 1 percent status with a brilliant red car for everyone to stare at. That's no way to fit in. And didn't Margot just say I should learn to connect?

Tomorrow—my own car. I'm all twitchy with the thought and head straight for my walk-in closet. It's mostly bare, it's so big. A half-empty suitcase holds some dress-down clothes for meeting the car guy. There's a torn T-shirt, but it's a brand label. Still, its blue is faded into blotchy patterns like a bad tie-dye. Who will guess? On the floor is a pair of capris, nicely stained.

Scissors snip off the pocket flap with its monogrammed designer logo. Grinning at myself in the mirror, I announce, “The princess breaks out of the castle.”

I study my long, thin frame, my somber stare, the clench of my jaw. Is that really my goal—to escape Dad’s realm of riches? I definitely gaze at his world, Hedge Fund Planet, like an outsider, at least that’s what I think. Am I right? All I know is my days are spent on Planet Pixel, creating my art, working on photographs, searching for meaning but not finding it in the lavish world Dad’s given me. I have more than I could ever need but not what I want: goodnight wishes, arms to hugs me, the smile of a best friend.

My fingers drum the windowsill, inspecting the party mob, finding a hundred reasons not to like any of them, so I launch myself across my bed, searching for images among the random patterns of the ceiling texture. These beige splats of drywall mud, knocked down to flat plateaus, are harder to concentrate on than my sprayed popcorn ceiling back in the old house, but I manage to spy a skyscraper, a bus, a man running down a street. I miss the city.

Getting edgy, little prickles of energy running across my skin, I jump up, pacing, not sure how to stand another minute here. We just moved into this upscale neighborhood above the town of Mossy Hills, but each lot is at least ten acres so you can’t even see the neighbors. This is the loneliest place I’ve ever been—beautiful, quiet—but it’s been two months of pure boring living here. That includes the town below. Nothing happens there that I can tell, though it’s still the dead months of summer.

A man’s surly voice ruptures my restless feeling. He’s talking on his cell in the shadows below my window loud enough for me to hear because the band’s on break. “I don’t care what the policy is, fire him.” He listens for a moment. “It’s not retaliation if you substantiate it.” Another pause. “So, make up something. He’s too smart. He’ll catch on.”

After a moment he says, “Yes, he’ll catch on, but not about the carbon tax.

Everyone knows Tasket Oil is backing us against it.”

The carbon tax? Dad’s against the carbon tax too, something that will hurt his investments in oil and gas. Is this guy talking about that? I lean into the window screen to catch every word he’s saying.

“It’s the project. He’s snooping around about it. I know he is.”

His tone sharpens. “Yes, it’s a sure thing ... I’ve got insider knowledge it will happen.”

“I can’t explain it, but it’s true. It’s like a crystal ball or something.” He sounds exasperated. “I don’t know when it will happen, but I’m certain of it.”

“No, I haven’t found it yet!” he shouts.

A woman calls through the shadows. “Tom, there you are. I thought you’d left me here.”

The man lowers his voice. “I’ve got to go,” he says. “Just fix it, or I’ll do more than fix it ... and you’ll be next.”

I shrink back from the window—the threat in those words as pungent as rotten fish. Does Dad know him? He knows a lot of nasty guys like him. Mom kept them away. She set the boundary firmly: “Not in my house. No dinner parties for clients.” Even Rory, Dad’s business partner, was only a name to me when Mom was here. These ruthless, wealthy men never invaded my life until Margot appeared. She thrives on having them around. When they show up at the door, I announce my urgent need to study for a test.

After fiddling with my aperture and ISO settings, making sure the flash is off, and dialing in the photo burst, I lean forward. My camera’s steady on the sill, ready to capture Tom’s face despite the darkness. Tom takes the woman’s arm and steers her toward the side of the house where his face is illuminated by a security light at the corner. *Click-click-click-click-click.*

Tom looks up. His beard is graying. His thick eyebrows scowl above a stare that’s as harsh as a dusty desert, reminding me of the threat he just made. Maybe that’s the way the world works at the upper levels of business. Someone has a plan, but someone’s in the way, so rules get broken all for the

pursuit of money. Ugh.

I gulp down a breath. “There was an owl in the trees. Trying to catch a photo.”

With a smile, the woman breaks the spell Tom’s cast. “Looks like a great camera, but it’s strange to see a teenager with one. Why not your phone?”

I focus on her, not him. “This one’s special. My brother gave it to me.”

She nods and tugs Tom away, waving. “Good luck with the owl.”

As they round the corner, Tom looks back, his eyes shadowed by the darkness. I raise my camera to deflect the venom in them. He blinks and turns away, but a chill settles in, washing me in the drab of browns and grays. Desperate for the reason he alarms me, I make one big guess—his piercing look shouts it—Tom knows exactly who I am.

With a shudder echoing in my bones, I rush to my desk to touch Mom’s rose-scented candle, its wick still white, its beeswax intact. Mom gave it to me ten years ago—her last gift, one as precious to me as Marty’s camera. I never lit it because how could candlelight replace her? Just a glance from her would push away the gloom. It wasn’t the brilliant blue of her eyes that would save me. It was their warmth, glistening in the highlights. I need some tenderness now to melt the frostiness of that man.

But even Mom’s candle can’t do the trick tonight, so I pace, scanning the crowd, searching for a path back to stillness. And then it’s there, yes, in the stone fountain rising on the high terrace. That tall granite pillar, softly curved like the waves in Mom’s hair, wraps her warmth around me. She’s hugging me, whispering: *I’m always here*. That hug, even imagined, reminds me who I really am: a dreamer, an artist, someone who searches for what’s important, just like Mom taught me.

My camera scans the crowd again—a huntress to frame my world. That’s why I love it, and not my phone. We become one—the camera, my eye—and the smooth rotation of the lens feels exquisite as my hand focuses it. *Swish. Swish.* My phone is just for quick pics, always ready but so distant. Besides,

all these camera dials challenge me, generating some *zing*, and it has a larger sensor for capturing low-light images, fast action, and cool effects.

Spotting Dad on the terrace, I follow him in the viewfinder, his hair speckled like salt and pepper, his eyes steel gray and hard as the metal. I take after him—black hair, long, narrow face, except my eyes are pale blue, a bit limp. Neither of us have that fair Irish skin. Mom had that. Marty had that too, plus a zillion freckles. The one thing true-Irish about Dad is his name, Paul Malloy. Malloy means noble chief and it fits. He definitely knows how to take command. He moves toward the fountain and stands alone, staring at the water sliding over it in gleaming sheets like he's remembering her—Mom, our angel of light.

It had always been a silent understanding that this fountain was Mom's memorial. Ten years ago, she chose it for the garden back in Portland. Dad brought it with us when we moved here, and as far as I can tell, he's never told Margot about the connection to Mom because, if he had, for sure, it would be a target for stepmom jealousy. It's the one secret that still connects me and Dad, even though it's never spoken between us.

And now I feel guilty about the car thing, wanting to rush down to him, put my arms around him, tell him it's okay, that I miss her too. It's not just the party that stops me. It's him. It's me. So instead, I head for the balcony again, camera clutched tight. Raising it, centering on Dad, I snap a photo, once, twice. *Click. Click.*

Dad's moving back into the crowd, turning away as my finger taps the shutter release one more time, but another face behind him captures my attention—high cheeks, strong brow, a face that says life's been lived. My lens captures the lines beneath the eyes but also a crinkle at their corners when he grins. A spark blazes in them like a star shooting across the sky. It's not Marty, but it's good. *Click.* I check the screen. Great exposure. Sharp focus. *Click. Click. Click.* I take at least ten more—his cheerful grin's so captivating—but then I stiffen.



Behind me on the upstairs landing, a woman giggles. A man releases an obnoxious burp. “Shh!” the woman hushes.

My arms wave at them wildly. “Hey, this is off-limits! Shoo. Shoo.”

They just wobble in front of me, too drunk to comprehend, so on comes my camera flash. *Click*. I blind them with it and chase them down the stairs with the light bursting across their backs. *Click. Click. Click*. Back in my room, I print out a sign: *NO ENTRY*, which gets taped to a chair placed at the top of the stairs.

Retreating, I lock my door and collapse at my desk. Marty’s photo is still open on the laptop, and my mind boomerangs into focus at the sight of him. Yes, that’s what’s troubling me, what has turned me into such a grouchy, gloomy, jumpy mess tonight. Counting on my fingers—March, April, May, June, July, August—I do the addition. That makes six months, and it’s August 5th. This is all about Marty.

Soon the only photos lined up across my laptop screen are ones of Marty hamming it for the camera. I’ve chosen his goofiest: hanging from a tree limb monkey-style, his grin jam-packed with glee; a big-eyed, high-dive belly flop, his mouth baboon-wide; plus countless prank scenes, like tiptoeing up on people with arched hands and wicked winks. And in every picture, his eyes gleam with giggles and hugs. Marty’s *joy-light*. That’s what Mom used to call it.

Mom and her words. Ordinary things turned special just by the names she gave them. The sun was the *EarthStar*. Clouds were *angel-mist*. Trees became *The Wise Watchers*. And my favorites as a girl—*yummy-dippers* and *grub-stabbers* were the names for spoons and forks. Mom was an artist like me, but she used words to paint her pictures. I keep a tight hold on them, her special words, to keep her close.

Just when I feel back in balance, from Mom-words and Marty-antics, I click to close a photo—one with Marty in the middle of a wild skateboard tumble, but the cursor freezes. A burst of light skips across the screen, once,

then twice, the second flit of brilliance less intense. The third time, the light creates a halo around Marty, quivering, pulsing, until it sputters out and fades away. I blink, searching the room, but nothing shimmers midair, so I study the photo. It hasn't changed. Marty's still all crazy arms and legs as his rebel skateboard veers off-frame, yet I get the eerie sense those tiny pixels have actually been in motion, even if only for a second, and they're just now settling back into place. The hairs rise on my neck. Something is there, something that makes me tremble like thunder rumbling through the sky.

And then it's gone. But the thunder stays, boiling, churning, building a storm. I dread the lightning heading my way.