

Where The Forest Meet The Stars

The girl could be a changeling. She was almost invisible, her pale face, hoodie, and pants fading into the twilight woods behind her. Her feet were bare. She stood motionless, one arm hugged around a hickory trunk, and she didn't move when the car crunched to the end of the gravel driveway and stopped a few yards away. As she shut down the car, Jo looked away from the girl and gathered binoculars, backpack, and data sheets from the passenger seat. Maybe the kid would return to her fairy realm if she wasn't watching. But the girl was still there when Jo stepped out of the car. "I see you," Jo told the shadow on the hickory. "I know," the girl said. Jo's hiking boots scattered chips of dry mud up the concrete walkway. "Do you need something?" The girl didn't answer. "Why are you on my property?" "I was trying to pet your puppy, but he wouldn't let me." "He's not my dog." "Whose is he?" "No one's." She opened the door to the screened porch. "You should go home while you still have some light." She flicked on the outside bug bulb and unlocked the door to the house. After she turned on a lamp, she returned to the wooden door and locked it. The girl was only around nine years old, but she could still be up to something. In fifteen minutes, Jo was showered and dressed in a T-shirt, sweatpants, and sandals. She

turned on the kitchen lights, drawing a silentbatter of insects to the black windows. While she readied grilling supplies,she idly thought of the girl under the hickory tree. She'd be too afraid of the dark woods to stick around. She'd have gone home.Jo brought a marinated chicken breast and three vegetable skewers outto a fire pit in a patch of weedy lawn that separated the yellow clapboardhouse from a few acres of moonlit grassland. The forties-era rental houseknown as Kinney Cottage was perched on a hill facing the woods, its rearside open to a small prairie that was regularly burned by the owner to keepback the encroaching forest. Jo lit a fire in her stone circle and set the cookingrack over it. As she laid chicken and skewers over the flames, she tensedwhen a dark shape rounded the corner of the house. The girl. She stopped justyards from the fire, watching Jo place the last of the skewers on the grill.“Don't you have a stove?” she asked.“I do.”“Why do you cook outside?” Jo sat in one of four ragged lawn chairs. “Because I like to.”“It smells good.”If she was there to mooch food, she'd be disappointed by the emptycupboards of a field biologist with little time for grocery shopping. She spokewith the rural drawl of a local, and her bare feet were evidence that she'dcome from a neighboring property. She could damn well go home for dinner.The girl edged closer, the fire coloring her apple cheeks and blondishhair, but not her eyes, still changeling black holes in her face.“Don't you think it's about time you went home?” Jo said.She came nearer. “I don't have a home on Earth. I came from there.”She

pointed toward the sky. "From where?" "Ursa Major." "The constellation?" The girl nodded. "I'm from the Pinwheel Galaxy. It's by the big bear's tail." Jo didn't know anything about galaxies, but the name sounded like something a kid would invent. "I've never heard of the Pinwheel Galaxy," Jo said. "It's what your people call it, but we call it something else." Jo could see her eyes now. The intelligent glint in her gaze was oddly shrewd for her baby face, and Jo took that as a sign that she knew it was all in fun. "If you're an alien, why do you look human?" "I'm only using this girl's body."

"Tell her to go home while you're in there, will you?" "She can't. She was dead when I took her body. If she went home, her parents would get scared." It was a zombie thing. Jo had heard of those games. But the girl had come to the wrong house if she was looking for someone to play Alien Zombie with her. Jo had never been good with kids and make-believe games, even when she was as young as the girl herself. Jo's parents, both scientists, often said her double dose of analytical genes had made her that way. They used to joke about how she'd come out of the womb, with an intent frown on her face, as if she were formulating hypotheses about where she was and who all the people in the delivery room were. The alien in a human body watched Jo flip the chicken breast. "You'd better get home for dinner," Jo said. "Your parents will be worried." "I told you, I don't have—" "Do you need to call someone?" Jo pulled her phone from her pants pocket. "Who would I call?" "How about I call? Tell me your number." "How can I have a

number when I came out of the stars?" "What about the girl whose body you took? What's her number?" "I don't know anything about her, not even her name." Whatever she was up to, Jo was too tired for it. She'd been awake since four in the morning, slogging through field and forest in high heat and humidity for more than thirteen hours. That had been her routine almost every day for weeks, and the few hours she spent at the cottage each night were important wind-down time. "If you don't go, I'll call the police," she said, trying to sound stern. "What will police do?" She said it as if she'd never heard the word. "They'll haul your butt home." The girl crossed her arms over her skinny body. "What will they do when I tell them I have no home?" "They'll take you to the police station and find your parents or whoever you live with." "What will they do when they call those people and find out their daughter is dead?" Jo didn't have to feign anger this time. "You know, it's no joke to be alone in the world. You should go home to whoever cares about you." The girl tightened her arms across her chest but said nothing. The kid needed a jolt of reality. "If you really have no family, the police will put you in a foster home." "What's that?" "You live with complete strangers, and sometimes they're mean, so you'd better go home before I call the cops." The girl didn't move. "I'm serious." The half-grown dog that had begged for food at Jo's fire for the past few nights skulked into the outer circle of firelight. The girl sat on her haunches and held her hand out, cajoling him in a high voice to let her

pethim. "He won't come closer," Jo said. "He's wild. He was probably born in the woods." "Where's his mother?" "Who knows?" Jo set down her phone and turned the skewers. "Is there some reason you're afraid to go home?" "Why won't you believe I'm from the stars?" The stubborn-ass kid didn't know when to quit. "You know no one will believe you're an alien." The girl walked to the edge of the prairie, held her face and arms up to the starry sky, and chanted some kind of gibberish that was supposed to sound like an alien language. Her words flowed like a foreign tongue she knew well, and when she finished, she smugly turned to Jo, hands on hips. "I hope you were asking your alien people to take you back," Jo said. "It was a salutation." "Salutation—good word." The girl returned to the firelight. "I can't go back yet. I have to stay on Earth until I've seen five miracles. It's part of our training when we get to a certain age—kind of like school." "You'll be here awhile. Water hasn't been turned into wine for a couple of millennia." "I don't mean Bible kind of miracles." "What kind of miracles?" "Anything," the girl said. "You're a miracle, and that dog is. This is a whole new world for me." "Good, you have two already." "No, I'll save them for really good stuff." "Gee, thanks." The girl sat in a lawn chair near Jo. The grilling chicken breast oozed greasy marinade into the fire, smoking the night air with a delectable scent. The kid stared at it, her hunger real, nothing imaginary about it. Maybe her family couldn't afford food. Jo was surprised she hadn't thought of that right away. "How about I give you something to eat before

you go home?" she said. "Do you like turkey burgers?" "How could I know what a turkey burger tastes like?" "Do you want one or not?" "I want one. I'm supposed to try new things while I'm here." Jo put the chicken breast on the cooler side of the fire before going inside to gather a frozen burger, condiments, and a bun. She remembered the last cheese slice in the refrigerator and added it to the girl's dinner. The kid probably needed it more than she did. Jo returned to the yard, laid the patty over the fire, and put the rest on the empty chair beside her. "I hope you like cheese on your burger." "I've heard about cheese," the girl said. "They say it's good." "Who says it's good?" "The ones who've already been here. We learn a little about Earth before we come." "What's your planet called?" "It's hard to say in your language—sort of like Hetrayeh. Do you have any marshmallows?" "The Hetrayens taught you about marshmallows?" "They said kids put them on a stick and melt them over a fire. They said it's really good." Jo finally had an excuse to open the marshmallows she'd purchased on a whim when she first moved to the cottage. She figured she might as well use them before they went stale. She got the marshmallows from the kitchen cupboard and dropped the bag into the alien's lap. "You have to eat dinner before you open them." The alien found a stick and sat in her chair, marshmallows sheltered in her lap, her dark eyes fixed on the cooking burger. Jo toasted the bun and placed a skewer of browned potatoes, broccoli, and mushrooms next to the

cheeseburger on a plate. She brought out two drinks. "Do you like apple cider?" The girl took the glass and sipped. "It's really good!" "Good enough to be a miracle?" "No," the alien said, but she downed more than half the glass in seconds. The girl was almost done with her burger by the time Jo took a bite. "When did you last eat?" she asked. "On my planet," the alien said around a cheek bulged with food. "When was that?" She swallowed. "Last night." Jo put down her fork. "You haven't eaten for a whole day?" The girl popped a potato cube into her mouth. "I didn't want to eat until now. I was kind of sick—from the trip to Earth and changing bodies and all that." "Then why are you eating like you're starved?" The girl broke the last piece of her burger and tossed half to the begging puppy, probably to prove she wasn't starving. The dog gulped it down as fast as the girl had. When the alien offered the last morsel in her hand, the puppy slunk forward, nabbed it from her fingers, and retreated as it ate. "Did you see that?" the girl said. "He took it from my hand." "I saw." What Jo also saw was a kid who might be in real trouble. "Are those pajamas you're wearing?" The girl glanced down at her thin pants. "I guess that's what humans call them." Jo sliced another piece of meat off her chicken breast. "What's your name?" The girl was on her knees, trying to creep closer to the puppy. "I don't have an Earth name." "What's your alien name?" "Hard to say . . ." "Just tell me." "It's kind of like Earpood-na-ahsroo." "Ear poo . . . ?" "No, Earpood-na-ahsroo." "Okay, Earpood, I want you to tell me the

truth about why you're here."She gave up on the timid dog and stood. "Can I open the marshmallows?" "Eat the broccoli first."She looked at the plate she'd left on her chair. "That green stuff?" "Yeah." "We don't eat green stuff on my planet." "You said you're supposed to try new things."The girl pushed the three broccoli florets in her mouth in quick succession. While she chewed at the lumps in her cheeks, she ripped open the marshmallow bag. "How old are you?" Jo asked. The girl swallowed the last of the broccoli with effort. "My age wouldn't make sense to a human." "How old is the body you took?" She poked a marshmallow onto the end of her stick. "I don't know." "I'm seriously going to have to call the police," Jo said. "Why?" "You know why. You're what, nine . . . ten? You can't be out alone at night. Someone's not treating you right." "If you call the police, I'll just run away." "Why? They can help you." "I don't want to live with mean strangers." "I was joking when I said that. I'm sure they'll find nice people." The girl smashed a third marshmallow onto her stick. "Do you think Little Bear would like marshmallows?" "Who's Little Bear?" "I've named the puppy that—for Ursa Minor, the constellation next to mine. Don't you think he looks like a baby bear?" "Don't feed him marshmallows. Sugar isn't what he needs." Jo pulled the last pieces of meat off her chicken breast and tossed them to the dog, too distracted to finish her food. As the meat disappeared into the mutt's gullet, she gave him the remaining vegetables from her two skewers. "You're nice," the girl said. "I'm stupid. I'll never

get rid of him now.” “Whoa!” The girl brought flaming marshmallows to her face and blew at the fire. “Let it cool off first,” Jo said. She didn’t wait, stretching the hot white goo to her mouth. The marshmallows vanished in short order, and the girl roasted another batch as Jo carried supplies into the kitchen. While she quickly washed dishes, she decided on a new strategy. Bad Cop clearly wasn’t working. She’d have to gain the girl’s trust to get anything out of her. She found the girl seated cross-legged on the ground, Little Bear happily licking melted marshmallow off her hand. “I’d never have believed that dog would eat from a human hand,” she said. “Even though it’s a human hand, he knows I’m from Hetrayeh.” “How does that help?” “We have special powers. We can make good things happen.” Poor kid. Wishful thinking about her grim circumstances, no doubt. “Can I use your stick?” “For marshmallows?” “No, to beat you off my property.” The girl smiled, a deep dimple indenting her left cheek. Jo punctured two marshmallows with the stick and hovered them over the fire. The girl returned to her lawn chair, the wild dog lying at her feet as if she’d miraculously tamed it. When the marshmallows were perfectly brown on all sides and sufficiently cooled, Jo ate them straight off the stick. “I didn’t know grown-ups ate marshmallows,” the girl said. “It’s a secret earthling children don’t know.” “What’s your name?” the girl asked. “Joanna Teale. But most people call me Jo.” “Do you live here all alone?” “Just for the summer. I’m renting the house.” “Why?” “If you live down this road—which I’m

sure you do—you know why.” “I don’t live down the road. Tell me.” Jo resisted an urge to contest the lie, remembering she was the GoodCop. “This house and seventy acres around it are owned by a science professor named Dr. Kinney. He lets professors use it for teaching and graduate students use it while they’re doing their research.” “Why doesn’t he want to live in it?” Jo rested the marshmallow stick against the fire-pit rocks. “He bought it when he was in his forties. He and his wife used it as a vacation house, and he did aquatic insect research down in the creek, but they stopped coming here six years ago.”