

Grownups

Turkey Creek Road was the five-mile gravel road that dead-ended at the creek and Kinney property. Driving it took a while, even in an SUV. After the first mile, it got narrow, snaky, potholed, and washboarded, and toward the end it was precariously steep in a few places where the creek washed it out in heavy rains. Jo's return trip on the road was her favorite part of the day. She never knew what the next bend might bring—a turkey, a family of bobwhite quail, or even a bobcat. At its end, the road brought her to a pretty view of the clear, rocky creek and a left turn that led to her quaint cottage on the hill. But it wasn't wildlife she saw staring back at her from the cottage walkway when she turned onto the Kinney property lane. It was the Ursa Major alien and her Ursa Minor dog. The girl was wearing the same clothes as the previous night, her feet still bare. Jo parked and jumped out of the car without removing her gear. "Why are you still here?" "I told you," the girl said, "I'm visiting from—" "You've got to go home!" "I will! I promise I will when I've seen five miracles." Jo took her phone from her pants pocket. "I'm sorry . . . I have to call the police." "If you do, I'll run. I'll find another house." "You can't do that! There are weird people out there. Bad people . . ." The girl

crossed her arms over her chest. "Then don't call." Good advice. She shouldn't do it in front of her. Jo put the phone away. "Are you hungry?" "Kind of," the girl said. She probably hadn't eaten since her meal at the fire. "Do you like eggs?" "I heard scrambled eggs taste good." "There's a guy who sells eggs down the road. I'll go get some." The girl watched Jo walk back to her car. "If you're lying and bring the police, I'll run." The desperation in the girl's eyes put Jo on edge. She spun the car around and turned onto Turkey Creek Road. About a mile from the cottage, she stopped at a hill where she was more likely to have a connection and dialed information to get the sheriff's non-emergency number. After three unsuccessful attempts, she laid the phone in the console. She had a better idea.

She arrived at the outer road just in time. Egg Man had taken down his canopy and FRESH EGGS sign, but he hadn't put away the table or three unsold cartons of eggs perched on his chair. Jo pulled her car into the roadside weeds and grabbed her wallet. She waited behind Egg Man while he leaned over the table to fold its legs. She'd never seen his whole body because he'd been seated behind the table when she bought eggs. He was about six feet tall and muscular from daily hard work, the kind of proportional strength Jo preferred to weight-lifting bulges. He turned around, smiling and making more eye contact than usual. "Sudden urge for an omelet?" he said, noting the wallet in her hand. "I wish," she said, "but I don't have cheese. I'll have to settle for scrambled." "Yeah, it's not

really an omelet without cheese.” She’d bought eggs from him three times in the five weeks since she’d arrived, and he’d never spoken as many words to her. Usually his side of the transaction was a nod, a calloused hand taking her money, and Thank you, ma’am when she said he could keep the change. Egg Man was a mystery to her. She’d assumed a guy who sold eggs on the side of the road would be a bit slow, but his eyes, the only feature that stood out in his heavily bearded face, were as sharp as shattered blue glass. And he was young, probably around her age, and she didn’t get why a smart guy that age would be selling eggs in the middle of nowhere. Egg Man dropped the folded table into the grass and faced her. “A dozen or a half?” Jo didn’t detect any hint of the drawl common in most Southern Illinoisans’ speech. “A dozen,” she said, handing him a five from her wallet. He took a carton off the chair and exchanged it for the bill. “Keep it,” she said. “Thank you, ma’am,” he said, stuffing the money into his rear pocket. He picked up the table and carried it to his old white pickup. Jo followed. “Can I ask you something?” He rested the table in the open bed of his truck and turned to her. “You can.” “I have a problem . . .” His eyes lit, more with curiosity than concern. “You live on this road, don’t you?” “I do,” he said. “Property right next to Kinney’s, as a matter of fact.” “Oh, I didn’t know.” “What’s the problem, neighbor?” “I assume you know the people who live on this road—you probably sell them eggs?” He nodded. “A girl showed up on my property last night. Have you heard of any kids

missing from home?" "I haven't." "She's around nine years old, slim, long dark-blond hair, big brown eyes . . . pretty face, interesting, kind of oval with a dimple on one cheek when she smiles. Does she sound familiar?" "No." "She has to be from around here. Her feet are bare, and she's wearing pajama bottoms." "Tell her to go home." "I did, but she won't. I think she might be afraid to go home. She hadn't eaten for a whole day." "Maybe you'd better call the police." "She says she'll run away if I do. She told me this wild story about being from another planet and borrowing a dead girl's body." Egg Man lifted his brows. "Yeah, pretty crazy. But I don't think she is. She's smart . . ." "Lots of crazy people are smart." "But she acts like she knows exactly what she's doing." His blue-glass eyes sharpened. "Why can't a person with a mental condition know exactly what she's doing?" "That's sort of the point I'm making." "Which is what?" "What if she's smart enough to know what she's doing?" "Meaning?" "She knows going home isn't safe." "She's only nine. She has to go home." He opened the passenger door and set the two remaining egg cartons on the floor. "So I call the police, and when the kid sees them coming, she runs, and who knows what happens to her?" "Do it on the sly." "How? She'll run into the woods before they even get out of the car." He had no advice. "Damn it, I don't want to do this!" He studied her sympathetically, his arm draped over the top of the open truck door. "You look like you put in a long day." She glanced down at her muddy clothing and boots. "Yeah, and it's getting longer than I'm up for." "How about

I come over and see if I know the girl?" "Would you?" "Can't promise it'll help." Jo held out the dozen eggs. "Bring these when you come. I'll tell her you ran out and had to go home to get more. Otherwise, you might scare her off." "This little girl has you in a state." She did, come to think of it. What the hell was going on with her? He put the eggs on the passenger-seat floor with the others. "What do you study?" She hadn't expected Egg Man to ask. She blanked for a few seconds. "Last summer there were a bunch of fish students at Kinney's," he said. "Summer before, it was dragonflies and trees." "I study birds," Jo said. "What kind?" "I'm looking at nesting success in indigo buntings." "Plenty of those around here." She was surprised he knew the name of the bird. Many people couldn't name one beyond cardinal, and even those were often called redbirds. "I saw you out walking a few times," he said. "Did you put up those pieces of orange surveyor tape?" "I did. Turkey Creek Road is one of my study sites." She didn't tell him the flags marked nests. If local kids found out, they might mess with them and spoil her results. She watched him fold the stadium chair. "Are you, by chance, missing a dog?" she asked. "I don't keep dogs, just a couple of barn cats. Why do you ask?" "A starving puppy is my other problem." "When it rains, it pours." "I guess so," Jo said, returning to her car. She didn't see girl or dog when she pulled into the cottage driveway. She unloaded her field gear and the fruit and muffins she'd bought at the farm stand. The girl was hiding, or

maybe she'd sensed trouble and split. As Jo put away her purchases, three soft knocks tapped the kitchendoor. Jo opened the door and looked down at the girl through the tattered screen. "Are you going to make the eggs now?" the girl asked. "The guy ran out," Jo said. "He's bringing some." "How can he bring some if he ran out?" "He's going home to get more. He lives on the property next to this one. Over there." The girl looked west where Jo pointed. "Want a blueberry muffin?" "Yes!" Jo plopped a muffin in her dirty hand. "Thanks," the girl said before burying her mouth in it. The food brought the dog from around the corner of the house, but the girl was too hungry to share. She'd already finished the muffin when Egg Man's white pickup rumbled down the gravel driveway half a minute later. Jo took the muffin paper from the girl's hand and tossed it onto the cold ashes in the fire pit. "Let's get those eggs," she said, beckoning the girl around the side of the house. "Oh no!" the girl said. "What?" "Little Bear ate the muffin paper." "I'm sure he's eaten worse. Come on." They met Egg Man at his pickup. As he handed the carton of eggs to Jo, he sized up the bedraggled girl from filthy bare feet to greasy hair. She looked much worse than she had the night before. "You live around here?" Egg Man asked the girl. "She told you to ask me that," the girl said. "That's the real reason you brought the eggs. You weren't really out." "A whippersnapper," Egg Man said. "What's that?" the girl said. "It means you've gotten too big for your britches. And speaking of britches, what are you doing going around in pajamas?" The waif looked down at her

lavender star-spangled pants. "The girl was wearing these when she died." "What girl?"

"The human whose body I took. Didn't Jo tell you?" "Who's Jo?" "I am," Jo said. Egg Man held out his hand. "Nice to meet you, Jo. I'm Gabriel Nash." "Joanna Teale." She squeezed his warm, coarse hand, very aware that she hadn't touched a young man in two years. She held on a little longer than she should, or maybe he did. "And what's your name, zombie girl?" he said, offering his hand to the girl. The girl backed away, afraid he'd try to grab her. "I'm not a zombie. I'm visiting from Hetrayeh." "Where's that?" he asked. "It's a planet in the Pinwheel Galaxy." "Pinwheel? Really?" "You've heard of it?" "I've seen it." The girl looked askance at him. "No you haven't." "I have. With a telescope." Something about what he'd said made the girl all beamish. "It's pretty, isn't it?" "It's one of my favorites." It must be a real galaxy. At least the girl hadn't lied about everything. Egg Man leaned against the front of his pickup, hands tucked into his jeans pockets. "Why'd you come to Earth?" "It's school for us. I'm like what Jo is—a graduate student." "Interesting. How long do you plan to stay?" "Till I've seen enough." "Enough what?" "Enough to understand humans. When I've seen five miracles, I go back." "Five miracles?" he said. "That'll take forever." "By miracles I only mean things that amaze me. When I've seen those five things, I'll go back and tell the stories to my people. It's like getting a PhD and becoming a professor." "You'll be an expert on humans?" "Just on

the little bit of your world I've seen. Like Jo will be an expert on bird ecology but not other kinds of science."

"Wow," he said, looking at Jo. "Smart little alien, isn't she?" Jo held the dozen eggs out to the girl. "Would you put these in the refrigerator for me?" "You'll let me in your house?" "Yes." "Only because you want to talk to him about me." "Put the eggs away." "Don't say anything mean." "Go on." The girl ran for the front door. "Walk," Jo called, "or your scrambled eggs will be on the sidewalk." She turned back to Egg Man. "What do you think?" "I've never seen her before. I'm pretty sure she doesn't live on our road." "She has to be from somewhere close. Her feet would be a mess if she'd walked far." "Maybe she lost her shoes since she got here . . . dipped her feet in a stream and forgot where she put them." He got off the pickup and rubbed his hand on his beard. "Her accent sounds like she's from around here—but all that stuff about graduate students and professors . . ." "She got that from me." "Obviously, but she looks too young to put it all together as well as she does." "I know, that's what I was trying to tell—" The girl burst out the porch door at a run, bare feet slapping the cracked concrete. "What are you saying?" she asked breathlessly. "We were saying it's about time you went home," he said. "Do you need a ride? I can take you in my truck." "You're going to drive me across the stars to my planet?" "You're too smart to think we'll believe you're an alien," he said, "and you know a girl your age can't be out on her own. Tell us the truth." "I am!" "Then Jo has no choice but to call the police." "Toh-id ina eroo-oy!" the girl said. "Toad in a

what?" he said. The girl burst into her alien language, speaking as fluently as she had the night before, but this time the speech was spoken as an invective at EggMan, with much arm and hand gesturing.