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Kindly Knights & Apple Pie

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Normand is standing outside the upstairs sewing room, about to knock on the door, which is entirely closed. There's a paper sign stuck to it with too much masking tape. The masking tape looks like it's been recycled from some other projects - all torn up and bent out of shape. The sign, which is on lined paper and written in red marker, says, "**Gone Curling. Go away.**"

Normand's niece is one of the three most important, complicated women in his life. He has several minutes before the other two arrive. He's brought a van-load of groceries. Not that Maeve needs any. Norm just needed an excuse to have to drive the minivan over the causeway, because then Claudette would insist that she and Olivia get out and walk, and that gives Norm important minutes to apologize to Maeve before he might have to do it in front of Claudette, and with Olivia stomping around mad at everybody and everything in the background and foreground and everywhere. That would make the apology at least three times more complicated. At least.

Normand isn't a big fan of messing up in front of people. He knows he's not perfect, he'd just rather make his mistakes when nobody is around to point them out so damn quick. He already knows damn well about the mistakes. No sense in making things worse.

"Maeve." Normand says, in his flat voice. "Hey, Maeve."

He knocks once. The sewing room - or Curling Room, as it's called when Maeve is having a moment in there - is small, and he knows his niece is right there on the other side of the door, on a cot, under one or more blankets. Depending on her mood, she might have dragged the sewing table in front of the door. That would not stop Normand from opening it, just slow him down a bit, but he's not going to open anything anyway. The Curling Room is a protected habitat. A person doesn't go in without Maeve's permission, when she's curling. That's just the rule.

"Maeve. It's Normand. You in there?"

Of course Maeve is in there, and of course she knows it's Normand. Of course she's not going to say anything, or open the door, and just pat him on the shoulder, and let him know they're all good. Goddammit.

She fell off a ladder. Because of him. Not really because of him - it was her own damn stubbornness, but still. Normand saw a guy die once, and another guy end up permanently unable to work ever again - both from falling off things. He had seen that happen to them in his time Out West and Up North, respectively.

Norm had laid awake all last night thinking about that.

She *had* told him she would wait until the weekend, so he could help her fix the damn shingles. But getting mad at Maeve for not remembering everything is like getting mad at a cloud for having to go behind a hill. Her thinking goes with the wind.

"Maeve. Come on. Claudette's going to be here any minute. I have to say something before she gets here. Lemme in."

No response.

"Maeve." *Knock knock.*

Nothing.

"Maeve. Maevis. Maevis Morgan. Niece Maeve."

Nope.

"I brought you *pie*. Apple pie. You like pie, right? Or am I wrong?" This is rhetorical, Maeve is a fan of every kind of pie, and everybody knows it, and she knows they know it. Normand can usually get Maeve to feel better and run errands and even change her mind about some things, just by bringing pie. Or most any other kind of junk food, really, but pie is best. She and Bee had a lot in common.

Norm hears a short squeak of cot springs. He raps on the door again.

There's a muffled voice from the other side of the door. Norm frowns and puts his ear to it. "What was that?"

The muffled voice gets a little louder. It sounds like, "Go away. But leave the pie."

"Come on, Maeve. I'm here to apologize. You know I suck at it." Normand has his hand on the door, like he's trying to mind meld with it. "Don't make me stand here like a dumb-ass. Claudette's probably halfway across the causeway already, and Olivia's in a mood. That same one she's had all year. You know I don't talk right when those people are around, and mad at me. You know that."

Maeve's voice sounds like it's coming from under three or four blankets in there. Maybe it's Bee's big old one. "I don't want to see

anybody, I'm curling. Go away." there's a short pause, then, "thanks for the pie. Say hi to Olive for me when you leave."

Normand rubs his face in his big hand, and thumps his forehead on the door. "Maeve. Look. I'm sorry I got mad that you fell off the roof. I was a jerk, obviously."

"I know that." says the muffled voice.

"I should have helped you get the ladder set up."

"It's a really, really huge ladder."

"I know, I know."

"I'm not a contractor, Norm."

"I *know*. Look, I was going to help you with that. I didn't think you'd try doing the whole damn roof without me. We're supposed to fix that stuff together, remember? Remember what Bee said? We have to fix these things together. We're a team." Norm isn't sure if bringing up Bee right now is a good idea. Too late.

No response.

"Maeve?"

Long pause. "My foot's fine, thanks for asking."

Normand doesn't know how he keeps getting himself into these things. Why did he only tell *Maeve* she was supposed to wait for him till the weekend? Why didn't he tell Claudette too? Then Claudette would have told him that it wasn't a good idea to ask Maeve to remember anything when she's upset. Maeve has been upset for months, since Bee.

Claudette always knows when Normand's decisions aren't going to be the right ones. Without Claudette, every decision Norm makes is just a coin toss. That's how it feels some days, to Norm.

He takes a breath. "Maeve. C'mon. Let me come in and say I'm sorry, to my niece the Blanket Ball. Then I'll leave her alone."

"My foot's fine. I want my pie now please."

Normand hears Claudette coming up the front porch.

"*Mon Dieu.*" he mutters to himself, and trundles down the hall and down the stairs. He left the food in the van, of course. He doesn't try saying anything to Claudette as she comes in. They won't be on proper speaking terms for another twenty-four to forty-eight hours, by his reckoning. He keeps his eyes on his shoes as she breezes past him, pie in hand and up the stairs, where she already knows Maevis Morgan has Gone Curling.

There's a knock on the sewing room door, and Claudette's voice says through it, "Maevis, Honey, I brought you pie - it's apple. Do you want it heated? There's ice cream too, and cheddar cheese, they're still in the van, but Olivia's bringing them in."

Maeve is curled up inside a thick, great big old blanket that still smells like her Great Aunt Bee, and she isn't sure she wants her apple pie heated, but she's glad to hear there's cheese in the house again. It's a big decision about the heating of the pie, and she doesn't feel up to making any more decisions today.

"Maevis, can I come in? The pie won't fit under the door."

Maeve's foot really hurts. She doesn't want to make a big deal about that right now, but it really does. It's swollen and huge and it's still throbbing and the brace itches too.

When she first fell two days ago, and her ankle went sort of sideways, she had gone down like a sack of potatoes, and then the old ladder had fallen on her, like it was trying to finish her off for good - like it could tell the fall hadn't killed her. In that moment, when the ladder tried to finish her off, after she'd already maybe broken her leg, it was like the Whole World had decided to finally attack her at once. An ambush. Everything wasn't where it should be, and her old ladder, in its death throes, had tried to take her with it. After all they'd been through.

It made her really angry, even though she was stunned from the fall and scared she'd broken something, and angry the masking tape hadn't held, and that she already knew it wouldn't anyway, and worried about the ice tea with Liz that she maybe wasn't going to have now. Worried about wanting a sister, and never having one. Wanting her Aunt Bee back. There were a lot of emotions.

She had just laid there on the ground, wondering if she had broken her leg, and getting angrier at the Whole World for attacking her that week - that whole year - and her foot started to get all warm and throbbing and it wasn't until later that it *really* started to hurt, when she had finally crawled, then hobbled to where her phone had gone (it happened to be under the kitchen table this time) and called Normand and yelled at him and then he started yelling back and she remembered that she had forgotten their deal to shingle the roof together on the weekend, and she knew she wouldn't be able to get the shingles on the roof in time for Liz's visit now, and her whole plan to tell Liz something scary and important and powerful - that she loved her - that she had been braving herself up to do for the last three months now, was all ruined. Just ruined. The Whole World had

tried to take her out. It succeeded. That's what it felt like to Maeve, right then.

And then while yelling at Norm later on the phone, she had heard Claudette in the background asking Normand what was going on and then they were arguing and it was all because Maeve used masking tape to fix the old ladder, because the wheelbarrow had had a flat since last year, and she had lost the air pump somewhere, and she had just forgotten too many things in a row this time. And now Claudette and Normand were mad at each other, because Maeve had maybe broken her leg, because of all that. Everything was her fault.

And then Liz had come over early yesterday, already sad, and Maeve had made things so much worse, even though it was really Peotr who had made things so much worse, and Maeve had hobbled around all day after Liz left, trying not to think about how Liz was angry with her now, and might never ever come back, and Maeve might never see Harry again either, until she was maybe an old maid on her deathbed, when he finally would, just one last time, like in tragic movies. Her imagination was really upset too. It really was.

She just couldn't have Liz join the rest of the Whole World being mad at her, for forgetting to do one more thing that she should have done sooner. She should have told Liz that Peotr almost kissed her, back when it had almost happened. She had just wanted that whole part to go away, like it had *never* almost happened. She often almost managed to forget some things. Not that one though.

And now Maeve just wants the pie under the blanket with her, and for Claudette to stay out in the hallway while she eats it and feels really sorry for herself. How can she tell Claudette that? She doesn't feel like talking. Everybody is mad at her.

"Go away" Maeve says.

"Maevis, Honey" says Claudette, through the sewing room door, "I'm *so sorry* we weren't there to help. I'm sorry that you fell... you gave us a big scare. We were *so* worried that you... I'm *so* glad you didn't break something. I *know* it hurts, sweetie."

Maeve curls up tighter, balling the giant blanket even more impossibly around herself. It's stuffy and hot, all wound up in that blanket, but she can't help it. She needs Bee's blanket to give her a hug. Claudette is talking to her like she's a kid. Maeve hates that, most of the time. Why do the people here all say they're *sorry* for things they didn't even make happen? Maeve's never gotten used to that part of Elders Falls, and its curious folk. She's been here forever, it seems, but she's still not from here. Why is everybody *sorry* all the damn time, for everything, like gravity, and grief?

"My foot's *fine*. I don't care about my foot. I'm *fine*."

"Maeve, Normand brought some groceries, he's putting them in the pantry and fridge. He went a bit nuts. He bought half the grocery store. He feels so bad. Not just because I'm mad at him this time. He loves you. We both love you."

"I *know* that." Maeve says, getting a bit testy now. Claudette's laying it on pretty thick. Maeve thinks a moment, and mumbles, "Everybody's mad at me."

"What's that, Maeve? I didn't hear. I'm sorry."

"*Everybody's mad at me.*"

"Maeve, no, we aren't. What do you mean? Nobody's mad at you. I'm coming in, alright?" After a pause, the door clicks and Maeve hears Claudette let herself in. Maeve sort of wishes now that she had

dragged the sewing table in front of the door, so Claudette would have to get Normand to come and move it. But then, she wants Claudette to come in and tell her again that nobody's mad at her. She doesn't want to talk to Norm right now. "Go away."

"Maeve -"

"I want to be alone." Maeve hears Normand coming up the front porch outside. It sounds like he's carrying a hundred grocery bags. She hopes he brought Ketchup chips.

Claudette leaves the door a bit open, and pulls up a chair, next to the cot where the huge pile of balled-up blanket is devouring her Niece. "Maeve, nobody's mad at you. Don't think that, OK? Normand just got upset because I freaked at him, because he had just told me that you fell off the roof. We were both terrified you had gotten hurt really bad. I'm sorry you heard us fighting. It's not the first time. That's what we do, you know, whenever he does something stupid." She gives the blanket-ball a playful poke. "It happens a lot, right? Not your fault."

Maeve isn't in the mood. She's not thirteen anymore. Her best friend in the entire world might never speak to her again. She shouldn't have told Liz about not-kissing Peotr. "Everybody is mad at me, Claudette."

Claudette's puts a hand on the blanket-ball. "*Nobody's* mad at you Maeve. We're *here*. You're *fine*. things will be alright. What can I get you?"

But things won't be alright, Maeve doesn't see how they could be. Everything went sideways. Her foot, her best friendship... even her ladder didn't fall right. Physics was a real jerk this week. Why doesn't Claudette ask her who *is* mad at her? That's all Maeve wants -

somebody to ask her what's *wrong*, not tell her that there's nothing wrong. And she wants her pie now. She doesn't need it heated, cold pie is fine.

"We're going to stay the weekend, OK? Olivia's brought her homework and her sparkly tween attitude. Normand's going to get the shingles done tomorrow, and you and I can eat ice cream all day. I brought some tapes. We'll get out Bee's VHS and we'll watch *Fraggle Rock* and nobody will say anything. I promise."

"I want to be alone", mumbles Maeve, but she knows now that Claudette won't leave her all alone.

Maeve pokes her hand out of the blanket and finds Claudette's hand and she holds it for a bit and then Claudette hands Maeve's hand a plate with a big piece of apple pie on it, and a fork stuck in that, and Maeve hears Claudette get up and leave, and the sewing room door shut lightly.

Still holding the pie plate level, like an expert, Maeve sits up and wiggles her top half out of the blanket. She heaves a big, slow sigh at the sewing room, and begins to take heaping, sorrowful mouthfuls of pie.

It's very good.

The sound of Normand and Claudette talking in low voices downstairs is calming. Normand isn't mad at Maeve, she knows that. He never stays mad at her for long anyway, and even when he is, he's always pretty half-assed about it, and then feels bad almost right away. And Claudette has never gotten mad at Maeve once, that she ever knew about anyway. Maeve wouldn't even know what that would feel like, having Claudette mad at her. Olivia's been mad at everybody and everything since she turned eleven, so Maeve doesn't

take that personally, she remembers what it's like to be eleven, going on thirteen.

So why does it feel like everybody is mad at her, then? There's only one person who's mad at her. That person just feels like everybody to her right now, that's all.

Some years before...

Maeve Morgan sits at her desk and tries not to notice that the desk is in the exact centre of the classroom. The classroom has 5 columns of desks and 7 rows. There are thirty-five desks in the room - plus the one for the teacher, at the front - and Maeve Morgan has joined the class in the middle of the year, and they have put her in the desk that is exactly in the middle of the room. It is in column 3, row 4.

It's 6 minutes before the start of the class, and most of the other kids have come in and almost all of them have spent some time staring at Maeve and almost all of them have said something at her, or to somebody else next to them about her, wondering where the *new kid* came from, and why she was there *now...* and none of them know how to talk quietly, so Maeve hears everything, and it is just not OK. They should reserve a corner desk in the back for kids whose parents make them go to school a month-and-a-half late. That should just be how it is.

Maeve isn't likely to make friends today, she knows it. Maybe not even this year. Maybe Ani will take her out of school before the end of the year, like she sometimes does, but Maeve is in for a few months of being *New Kid*, no matter what. Why did it have to be the *middle* desk? Why did she have to draw the *middle desk*, right in the

middle of middle school? Maevis doesn't like being in the middle, much. Her mother Ani has terrible, terrible timing. And bad aim too.

Somebody has carved the words "*pee pee!*" on her desk, using a pocket knife, or compass. There's an illustration to go with it. Inappropriate. Maybe she can just stare at the words "*pee pee!*" all day. No, that probably won't help.

"Hey," some kid next to her says. "Hey, you, *kid*. Hey. What's your name?"

Maeve feels her face flush. She doesn't look up. There are kids all around, all looking at her from their desks, and as they walk in and pass by, and they are swapping stories about where she might have come from, and wondering if anybody knows where she lives, or if she can talk. Maybe she can't hear, one of the kids wonders. Maeve just holds onto her new desk, and imagines it's a rocket-powered desk, and maybe it will launch her out of here any minute, really quick. Not quick enough.

"Hey, kid. What, can you hear me? *Mitch, shut up!*" The kid hisses something to Mitch, whoever that is, who has said something about Maeve, that she tried not to hear. Maeve isn't sure if she is going to be able to hold on to the desk hard enough, for long enough. She feels like she might fall backward, and tumble to the back of the room, and hit the wall there, among all the coats and posters, because it feels like it's all titling up. Why did someone need to carve "*pee pee!*" on her desk? Did they know she was going to have to sit here, and stare at that, maybe all year?

"Hey, you. Why are you *here*?"

Sometimes, when everything seems to be moving on its own, Maeve finds rocking back and forth, just a little bit, helps things to stop

moving so much. When things are already moving, and when she manages to rock back and forth, just a little bit, then everything will sometimes stop moving again, and go back to almost normal. She's learned to do this rocking only a *little* bit, and not a whole lot. Like she's maybe listening to good music that nobody else can hear.

"What's she doing?"

"She's going to blow up. Look out."

"*Shut up.* Maybe they've got special needs."

"*Shh*, she can hear you, stop. She *can* hear, you know."

"Look at her, she's going to blow up. Look ooouut...."

"*Mitchell. Shut. Up.*"

"Hey... what's your name? Why are you here? Where did you *come* from?"

There's a rushing sound now and Maeve's hands are numb from holding on to the desk pretty hard. She forgot her watch, she forgot her watch, she forgot her watch. She doesn't know how many more minutes this class is going to be. It hasn't started yet. She's in the middle of the room. Row 4, Column 3.

Her eyes are closed, and she's holding her breath. Ani told her to close her eyes and breathe. But she's holding her breath instead. She forgot some instructions.

And then, a voice. Like a bell.

The voice, clear as a bell, says, "Hi, I'm Liz", and Maeve thinks she's heard a bell.

"I have to sit here, today. I need to see the board, and I lost my glasses. Ellie, switch, OK?"

Maeve doesn't know who the bell's voice came from. To her left. Her eyes are closed tight. She isn't sure who Liz is. She doesn't know who Ellie is either. She doesn't know where she is. Where is her Mom?

"Is that alright? I sit over there most days but I lost my glasses somewhere, so I'm going to sit here, next to you. If that's OK."

Maeve has maybe stopped rocking - just a little bit.

"I can't see the board without them, I'm sorry. Is that OK? I won't bug you, I promise."

A desk scrapes against the floor and then Maeve opens one eye and sees a desk trying to scooch up next to hers, and the desk politely waits while Maeve moves her hand so Liz with the voice like a bell can put the desks completely together, and then they're together.

"My name is Liz." says the voice, like a bell. Maeve feels herself nod. The teacher is at the front of the class now, telling everybody to take their seats, and welcome Miss Maevis Morgan, and then says everybody open their textbooks, and Liz's hand, poking out from a fuzzy blue sweater, opens Maeve's book, and then opens her own, and their textbooks sit there, touching corners, all class.

That first period, Liz's voice answers any question anybody asks Maeve, after Maeve doesn't answer it, so Maeve can just look at the words "*pee pee!*" carved on her desk, and wonder why somebody would write that, and then why would they draw it too, and did they use a pocketknife, or a compass? Liz has a kind, clear voice, like a bell. Liz is good at math, and spelling, and answering questions. Maeve wants to know what Liz looks like, past her blue, fuzzy

sweater sleeve, but she'd rather not look up, so she's going to look down or keep her eyes closed all day, if she can figure out how to do that without walking into anybody or into traffic.

At recess, which takes forever to happen, Maeve is standing against a brick wall in the playground where Liz's voice left her for just a minute, and looking at a faded hopscotch game on the cracked pavement. And she's opening her Pop Tart, which is sort of like pie, but better for travelling. It's blueberry.

Then there are shadows over the hopscotch game, and Mitch's voice is telling her exactly what they need to know. He tells her they need to know who she is and what's her problem. Is she too good for them, Mitch needs to know that. And Liz hasn't been gone for long and that's when Mitch and his friends have come over to get the answers they need, out of Maeve. Her reasons for being there, and why she thinks she's better than everybody, and what's her problem. She doesn't understand, she doesn't think she's better than anybody at all. That's not her problem. Mitch has it all wrong. A hand breaks her blueberry Pop Tart, and half of it falls to the ground, on the 2 square. She isn't better than anybody, she already knows that.

And then Liz's voice is there again, and it rings loud, like a bell, but different, and it tells Mitchell to never talk to Maeve like that, and to pick up her Pop Tart and say sorry, or Liz will never talk to Mitchell again.

It's not what Maeve or Mitchell expected, such a strange promise: *or I'll never talk to you again.*

And Mitch doesn't say sorry or pick up the Pop Tart - he doesn't say anything at all, and the shadows over the hopscotch game are gone quickly, and the back of Liz's head is there while she picks up

Maeve's fallen Pop Tart, and her hand from the fuzzy blue sweater brushes it off and hands it back to her, and Maeve feels herself nod.

The day goes a bit better after that, but still really long. There are lots of kids calling Maeve *Kid* and *Hey* and one or two are calling her *Maeve* even, like Liz does, and there are lots of questions and she has to make things stop moving, but Liz's voice is just right there, the whole day, like a bell, and Maeve doesn't know what Liz looks like, except for the fuzzy blue sweater, and the colour of her hair, because she keeps her eyes closed or looking down most of the time, and she just imagines what Liz looks like, by listening to her words, all on their own.

And Maeve imagines a knight in shining armour - but wearing a fuzzy sweater, and with a kind, clear voice like a bell, who is good at math, and spelling, and answering questions, but who forgot their glasses somewhere, so they have to sit next to Maeve. Maeve never thought that knights might need to wear glasses, or could wear fuzzy sweaters. Nobody told her those things about knights - she found them out for herself, in school.

That day is the longest day Maeve will ever spend going to classes. There will be some pretty long days of those ahead, but that one will be the longest she'll ever remember.

Liz's voice follows her around all day, and even with her onto her bus, and Liz's voice is next to her on the bus, and shields her from every thing that every kid says or asks or needs from Maeve, and some of the kids are calling her *Maeve*, and one of them asks her how old she is, and Liz tells them that Maeve is thirteen, and Maeve knows that's not right but doesn't say anything. Liz even tells Maeve when they're at her stop, and Maeve doesn't know how Liz knows all of that - she just does.

And then Liz's voice says she'll see Maeve tomorrow in class, and Maeve already knows that's not true, but she will always think of Liz as the best kind of knight - one who carries a shield but never shows you her sword, because her voice is kind and clear and strong enough, all on its own, like a bell.

Ani doesn't make Maeve go back to school after that first day, in the middle of October, because Maeve is really good at hanging onto the door jamb, and Ani has small wrists that aren't great for pulling eleven-year-olds off of door jambs, and she has to get to work anyway, or she might be fired again. So Maeve hangs out in the stockroom at the restaurant that week, while Ani works, until Ani can figure out what to do next. Ani always figures out what to do next - Maeve's not too worried about it.