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# *Still*



by Greg Wilson

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*A lot of my stories aren't true,  
but this is a true story.*

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# Chapter 1

**O**nce upon a time, a young puppet named Still lived in a city full of everyday wonders. This is the story of the worst thing that ever happened to her.

Still wore black and white and eight shades of green, and had a happy, smiling face. She went to school every day to study reading, juggling, arithmetic, and history. At recess and lunch, she and her friends chased each other around the playground, pretending to be lions. When they grew bored with that, they played swing-ball, or Thieves and Gargoyles. If they were in a very wicked mood, and the teachers weren't looking, they tied little bits of string to each other's arms and legs, then staggered around as if someone else was making them move. "Help me, help me," they cried, until whoever was pretending to be Key the Cutter set them all free.

Still liked her school and her friends, but what she liked most was her violin. It was carved out of heartwood, just like her, and had been polished until it was a deep, liquid brown. She loved to play everything from jingly little children's songs to slow, sad waltzes that sounded like the river at night. She never went anywhere without it—she even took it to bed with her, and slept with it in her arms.

The two puppets who had made Still were named Elbow and Ramble. One day, Elbow brought a great big box full of old papers home from his shop. "The mayor found these in the basement of City Hall," he told Ramble and Still. "And she wants *me* to fold them up so that they can be put away properly. It's going to be a nasty job. See?" He lifted one of the pieces of paper gingerly out of the box and held it up for them to see. It was yellow around the edges, and crackly-stiff from having been damp and then dried out. "Never mind straight

creases—if I make even the slightest mistake, the paper might tear!”

“Well then, I suppose we’d better stay out of your way for a while,” Ramble said. She kissed his cheek. “I should grind some lemon peel and amber for my paints. Still, why don’t you clean up your room? It’s such a mess.”

“All right,” Still said. She had her school books spread out on the kitchen table, and was drawing little wind-up tarantulas on the back of her arithmetic homework.

Ramble waited a moment. Her daughter kept drawing. “Still?” she asked again.

“All *right*,” Still said crossly. Up the stairs she went, *clomp clomp clomp*, thinking dark thoughts about the unfairness of parents and how if they meant ‘right now’ they ought to *say* ‘right now’.

Still’s room *was* a mess. There were socks on her bookshelves, books sleeping in piles on her desk, and pencil shavings spilling out of her drawers. A small paper boat looked down on it all from atop her dresser. Elbow had made it when she ran away from home on her fifth birthday. On one side were the words, “Have you seen our daughter? Please tell her we love her very much.” On the other was a drawing of Still with her violin. Still had come home on her own before the boat was launched, so Elbow had given it to her as a present. “Just in case we ever try to varnish you on your birthday again,” he had said solemnly.

Still stared forlornly at her room. *I don’t even know where to start*, she thought, so she sat down on her bed to puzzle it out. To help her think, she tucked her violin under her chin and began to play.

“Still,” Ramble called a moment later. “Are you cleaning your room?”

“Ye-ess,” Still called back. She put her violin aside and stood up—then sat back down again. She couldn’t put her books away until she moved her socks, but she couldn’t put

*them* away until she tidied up the pencil shavings, and she couldn't do *that* until she moved her books... Her hand strayed to her violin as she thought. She couldn't do *that* until she did *that*, but she couldn't do *that* until she did *that*. *Da di-di-di dah, da di-di-di dah.*

"Still!" Ramble said loudly. Still snatched her hand away from her violin. She had been plucking the little tune on the strings without even realizing that she was doing it. And now Ramble was standing in the bedroom doorway, her shoe going *tap tap tap* on the floor. "Elbow needs to concentrate. If you want to play your violin, why don't you go outside and do it? You know how much the birds like to listen to you."

"Can I go to Mister Leaf's?" Still asked. "He told me last week that he thought I was ready for some special lessons." She held her breath. Music lessons were *much* more fun than cleaning her room.

"Special lessons?" Ramble asked. "He didn't say anything to me about special lessons the last time I spoke to him. Did he say how much they were?"

"I don't think they cost anything," Still said. "I think it's because my recital is just three weeks away. Can I? Please?"

Ramble's shoe went *tap tap tap* while she thought. "All right. But you go straight to Mister Leaf's, and come straight home. And you still have to clean up your room before you go to bed tonight."

"I will!" Still promised. She gave Ramble a hug, then raced down the stairs, *clatter clatter clatter*. The front door went *bang!* behind her.

Still skipped along the cobblestone streets, playing little tunes as she went. Just as she'd promised, she went straight to Mister Leaf's house—except for a detour to walk heel-to-toe around the lip of a fountain pool, and a brief stop to wave at a passenger balloon that was taking off for the moon.

Mister Leaf's house stood across from a little square of park full of trees and benches. Just as Still reached it, a drop of rain

hit the cobblestones beside her. *Plop!* Another drop landed beside it, then another, and another. “Oh, mildew,” Still said crossly. She didn’t mind the rain, but Ramble would fuss about her warping if she got wet. She looked up at the fat, gray clouds, then ran *tik tik tik* across the cobblestones to ring Mister Leaf’s doorbell.

The door opened a moment later. A deep, warm voice said, “Why, what a pleasant surprise! Please, please, come in.”

## Chapter 2

**M**ister Leaf wore blue and orange and a round, flat-topped polka-dot hat. He had black curls painted on his forehead and a big smile painted on his face. His eyes were made of tiger-orange topaz. They were so friendly that they sometimes seemed to shine.

He stepped out of the way and waved her in. “To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?” he asked.

“My father brought some work home,” Still told him as they went upstairs to the music room. “He says it’s really important, and my mother told me I was making too much noise, so I was hoping I could get one of the special lessons you were talking about. I mean, if you have time,” she added hastily, suddenly feeling a bit guilty about showing up out of the blue.

“Of course I have time,” Mister Leaf said, his voice as warm as a cello. “A good teacher always has time for a good student. But look, your violin is wet. You should dry it off so that the finish isn’t ruined.” He took a red-checked tea towel off the top of the piano and handed it to her.

Still brushed a few drops of water off her violin, then handed the towel back to Mister Leaf. As she did so, their fingers touched with a faint *click*.

Still felt as though someone had suddenly painted a warm blush on her cheeks. She turned to the window to hide her confusion, tucking her violin under her chin. The rain was darkening the red bricks of the houses across the street. “Shall I start with scales?” she asked.

“Of course,” Mister Leaf said. The piano bench creaked as he sat down. “You should always start with a few scales. But not too fast—the most important thing is to hear your own



music as you play it. Oh, and don't worry so much about getting your fingers in the right places—they know what to do. Now, one, two, three, four..."

Still played a G scale, then a B scale, and then a D flat scale (which is almost the hardest scale there is). Mister Leaf nodded his head and patted the piano bench with his hand to help her keep time. Every once in a while he said, "Good, good," or, "Slow down—try to smooth the notes into each other a little bit more."

"Very nice," he said when she finished. "Now, how about a song? Something melodic, I think."

"All right." She laid her bow across the strings of her violin and drew it down slowly. The sound was like a mint-covered chocolate: sweet and thick on the outside, but as crisp as mountain air inside. She closed her eyes and played a slow, sad waltz.

She didn't open her eyes until she was done. Even then, she waited a moment, until the last melancholy note had faded from her mind. Then, "Oh!" she gasped.

Mister Leaf was standing just inches away from her. His eyes glittered orange-yellow. "Ahhh..." he sighed. "That was... exquisite. May I try?"

"Try what?" Still asked.

"Your violin—may I try it? It makes such a beautiful sound."

"Oh. Oh my." All of a sudden Still felt like her clockwork was whirring at double speed inside her. "I've never let anyone else play my violin before," she said. "I—I don't know if I should."

"Oh, well, it's not important," Mister Leaf said. Even as he said it, though, the glitter faded from his eyes. Still opened her mouth to say, "It's all right, I don't mind," but it was too late. Mister Leaf had already turned around and gone back to his piano bench.

“Now,” he said briskly, “Let’s try that fingering exercise we started last week. Low to high, then a trill, then high to low, and hold the bottom note. Remember? Yes? Good. One... two... one two three four.”

Still had been practicing the exercise all week, but now her hands seemed to have forgotten everything they’d learned. Her fingers fell in the wrong places when she went for the high notes. Her bow even bounced off the strings a couple of times.

By the time she finished, she felt like she had another blush painted on her cheeks, a blush of embarrassment. “Hm, well,” Mister Leaf said. “That one will need a bit more work, won’t it?”

“Yes, Mister Leaf,” Still said meekly.

He nodded. “I’m sure you’ll get on top of it. Now, when’s our next lesson, tomorrow? Yes? All right, I want you to work on nothing but that exercise from now until then. No waltzes, no bird songs, nothing but that exercise. I know it doesn’t sound like a lot of fun,” he continued, raising one hand to cut her off, “But you have to do it if you want your playing to mature. Nice little tunes are fine for nice little children, but you want to be more than that, don’t you?”

“Yes, Mister Leaf,” Still repeated.

He nodded. “Good. I’ll see you in a couple of days.”

The rain had stopped while Still was playing, although a few dark clouds still nuzzled each other over her head. Still’s thoughts went round and round as she slowly walked home. She could play that exercise almost perfectly—it was stupid to flub it like that. And... She shivered. She had never even really *thought* about someone else playing her violin before.

She was about to cross the street when she noticed a bedraggled paper boat caught up against some sticks and leaves in the gutter at her feet. Normally she would have just walked by, but for some reason she felt a pang of sympathy for it.

She bent down to pick it up. “Have you seen our son?” was written on its side. She turned the boat over and looked. A drawing of a young puppet, about Still’s age, looked back at her. She turned the boat over again, pinching the creases with her thumb and finger to straighten them out.

“I’m sorry, I haven’t,” she said softly as she set it back down in the gutter. “But I hope you find him.” The boat bobbed up and down as it drifted away.

Still felt a sudden pang of guilt as she watched it go. Mister Leaf was such a good teacher... He was even giving her extra lessons. She turned around impulsively and hurried back to his house.

*Knock knock knock.* As soon as Mister Leaf opened the door, Still blurted, “I—please, can I try that exercise again? I think I can do it properly this time.”

“Oh, splendid,” Mister Leaf said warmly. “I’m sure you can. Go on, go upstairs.”

Still went up into the music room and waited for Mister Leaf to sit down at the piano. Instead, he leaned against the doorway with his arms folded. “Start whenever you’re ready,” he said softly.

Still nodded and tucked her violin under her chin. *Please please please do it right*, she thought. She brought her arm up and started to play.

This time, the notes were perfect—each in its proper place, light but confident, without a single skip or slip. When she finished, Mister Leaf straightened up and clapped his hands. “That was beautiful,” he said. “Perfect, every note. Well done.”

“Thank you,” Still said. “Would you... would you like to try it?”

Mister Leaf’s eyes glittered. “Try what?” he asked.

*Tick tick tick tick tick* chattered Still’s clockwork. “Would you like to play my violin? I—I don’t think I’d mind.”

“Are you sure?” Mister Leaf asked.

No, said Still's heart, but, "Yes," said her mouth. "Yes, I'm sure." She held her violin out to him.

Mister Leaf took the violin in one hand, and the bow in the other. He gazed at the violin for a moment as if it was the most precious thing in the world. "It's perfect," he whispered. "The varnish... the polish... It's perfect."

Suddenly he tucked the violin under his chin. He thrust the bow across the strings. *HRING!* He drew the bow down again, *HWAH-HWING!*

"Wait, stop!" Still said. "You mustn't play so hard!" But Mister Leaf wasn't listening. He began to fiddle furiously, faster and faster, faster than Still had ever seen anyone play. The bow flew back and forth across the strings. The violin sang, then howled, then shrieked as he played high notes and low notes, chords and pizzicatos and trills that ran from one end of the scale to the other.

"No, wait, stop! Stop! Oh please, stop!" Still cried, but Mister Leaf played on. Still grabbed his arm and tried to pull the violin away from him, but he was too strong. Faster and faster he played, until suddenly the strings went *PLINK!* *PLINK!* *PLINK!* He had cut right through them!

But even then Mister Leaf didn't stop. Before Still's horrified eyes, a gray wisp of smoke started to rise from the body of the violin. He was playing so fast that the violin was catching on fire!

It must have been the smell of smoke that made him stop, because there is nothing that puppets fear more than fire. He scraped the bow across the violin one last time, then let his arm drop.

To Still's horror, he began to chuckle. The chuckle turned into a laugh, and the laugh got bigger and bigger. "Ah hoo hoo hoo hoo," he chortled. "Ah hee hee hee. Oh, th-th-that was fun! That was *fun!*"

As he laughed, Still began to cry. "What have you done?" she wept. "What have you done to my violin?"

Mister Leaf's laughter subsided. He blinked at the violin. "Oh my," he said softly, "Whatever have we here?" The bow had scorched a shallow brown groove into the violin's cheek.

Still snatched it from his arms. "You broke it," she sobbed, hugging the violin to her chest.

"Sh, sh," Mister Leaf said. "It's not that bad, not really. I'm sure it can be fixed."

"But what will I tell Ramble?" she wailed. "And Elbow?"

"Oh, you mustn't tell them anything," Mister Leaf said hastily. "Why, if they found that you'd let this happen, they'd—they'd—why, they'd put strings on you, that's what they'd do! They'd screw little eyehooks into your elbows and knees, and run black silk strings through them. They'd never let you move your own arms and legs, just to make sure you couldn't ever do anything like this again. Do you want that? No, I didn't think so. Now look, the rain has stopped—I think it's time for you to go home."

## *Chapter 3*

**A**fterward, Still could never remember how she had found her way home. All she could think about was her violin—her poor, wounded violin.

Her joints ached with the damp and the cold as she stumbled through the front door, straight into Elbow's arms. "Still! Still, what's wrong? What happened?" he said, alarmed. His eyes widened as he caught sight of the ugly dent that marred the finish of her left cheek. He lifted her head gently. "Oh, Still, what happened?"

"What?" She brought her hand up to her cheek. Her fingers probed the dent gingerly. "I—I fell," she said vaguely. Had she fallen? She couldn't remember. "But look." She held up her violin. "It— it—"

Elbow dropped the old menu he'd been folding and hugged his daughter. "Sh, sh, sh," he said, rocking her gently, trying to keep his voice steady. "Come in here where it's warm. Ramble! Ramble! Come quick!"

The two puppets sat their daughter down at the kitchen table and gave her a cup of warm linseed oil. "Here, let me see that," Ramble said gently. She took Still's chin in her hand and turned her head from side to side to look at the dent in her cheek. "Oh, it's not so bad," she said after a moment. "A bit of putty, and some sanding, and you'll be as good as new."

"Why, it'll even make you look more grown-up," Elbow said. "Just like the dimples in my cheeks. I wasn't carved with them, you know. I got this one when I fell out of a tree, and this one when—"

"But what about my violin?" Still interrupted. She had three thick blankets wrapped around her, but she still felt cold. Even with a big gloop of honey, the linseed oil tasted like something

that someone had cleaned out of a crankshaft and then left to grow sludgy. Still didn't notice. All she could think about was the black scorch mark on her violin.

"We'll take it to the shop tomorrow and get it mended, I promise," her mother said gently. She took the violin from her daughter's stiff hands and laid it aside. "Now, why don't we put you to bed? I'm sure you'll feel better in the morning."

So Still went upstairs, put on her pajamas, and lay down in bed. Moments slipped by, one after another, but didn't stick. Her mind didn't think about— about— about anything, just as her hand wouldn't have touched a hot stove.

Morning came. Still's window grew brighter as the sun climbed toward noon. Her mother and father looked in on her a couple of times, but Still kept her eyes closed and pretended to be asleep. She felt like she was floating on a broad dark river, just letting it carry her wherever it wanted to.

The school bell was ringing "lunch is over, lunch is over" in the distance when the doctor arrived. He had narrow shoulders and a beaky nose, and wore wire-rimmed glasses without any glass in them. "Yes, yes, yes," he said absently, "Let's see what we have here, hm? Let's just see what we have..." He put his stethoscope on Still's tummy and chest to listen to her clockwork go *tick, tock, tick, tock*. Then he sighted along her arms and legs, one by one, to see if the rain had warped them.

The last thing he checked was the dent in her cheek. "Does it hurt?" he asked, poking it with his finger. Still shook her head. "And do you feel dizzy at all?" he asked. She shook her head again.

The doctor straightened up. "Well, as far as I can tell, she's as sound as the day she was made," he said to Ramble. "Her clockwork seems fine—no scraping or odd jingles that I can hear. That dent in her cheek, now, that's going to leave a mark, but it's not really very serious. I'm sure you can mend it as well as I could."

"Then what is it?" Ramble asked. "What's wrong?"

The puppet doctor smiled and patted her shoulder. “Oh, I suppose something is just jumbled up a bit. It happens with girls her age. I’m sure it will sort itself out if she rests for a day or two.” And with that, the doctor gave them his bill and saw himself out.

So Still got to stay home from school that day, and the day after that. Each morning she lay in bed until her mother or father came to get her. She brushed her teeth and oiled her joints and got dressed, then went down to the couch and sat under the blankets, staring out the window. Bright red streetcars went past every few minutes, and occasionally a solemn silver balloon floated by in the distance, on its way to some far-off land. Sometimes her fingers twitched, as if she was playing the violin, but she never mentioned it, or wondered where it had gone.

Each morning, she looked at a stranger in the mirror. That dented face—that wasn’t her, was it? “You mustn’t tell,” she warned her reflection. “They’ll put strings on you if you do.” She never thought about *what* she mustn’t tell—that thought was already buried, down deep where it couldn’t hurt her, deeper than any pirate treasure.

But once, in the afternoon, when the light was pearly-gray, she remembered the little paper boat that she had found in the gutter, with “Have you seen our son?” written on it. She wondered what had happened to it—had it snagged on another bunch of twigs further down the stream? Or had it found its way to one of the canals that ran through the city? The thought floated away as quietly as the little boat had, and didn’t return.

On the third day, her father came into her room with a big smile painted on his face. “If you’d like to get up and get dressed, there’s something waiting for you downstairs,” he said.

“All right,” Still said. A moment went by. She didn’t move.

“Oh, come on, daffodil,” Elbow said. “It’ll cheer you up, I promise!”



“All right,” Still said again. Being cheered up didn’t feel any more important than school or eating.

She made her way downstairs. A big box wrapped in brightly colored paper was waiting for her on the kitchen table. The folds in the paper were so clever that her father eventually had to show her how to get it off without tearing it.

She set the paper aside and took the lid off the box. “Well?” her father asked a moment later. “What do you think?”

Her violin lay inside on a bed of straw. Brand-new strings glistened silver-bright along its neck, and its body had been sanded down smooth and re-varnished. There was only a faint, shallow groove to show where—where—

“What do you think?” her father asked again. “Good as new?”

“I guess so,” Still said. “Thank you.”

“Splendid!” Elbow said jovially. “Now, if you hurry, you can still get to school in time for juggling.”

“All right,” Still said dully. She stood up and walked toward the front door.

“Wait—aren’t you going to take your books?” Elbow asked.

Still stopped. “Oh. I forgot.” She went back into the kitchen, dumped her books and unfinished homework in her bag, and turned to leave again.

Just before she got to the door, Ramble spoke up for the first time that morning. “Aren’t you going to take your violin?”

Still stopped, then said, very softly, “I guess so.” She returned to the kitchen one more time, took her violin out of its box, and walked out onto the street.

Still trudged along the cobblestones. The sky was a clear autumn blue. Little clockwork birds chirped in the trees. The puppets passing by chattered to one another as if nothing had happened. She ran her thumb back and forth over the faint groove in the top of the violin that was the only sign of—of— She stopped for moment to let the dizziness pass. What was she doing? Oh, yes—school. She was going to school.

*Plang... plang...* The principal stood by the door with a serious look on her face, tugging on the bell cord. “Come along, come along,” she said. “There are lessons wanting learned.” The students groaned and gossiped as they filed past her.

Still was the last one in line. “Good morning, Still,” the principal said. “Hope you’re feeling better.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Still said quietly.

The principal squinted at Still’s face. “Hm. Nasty one, that. No splintering, I hope?”

“No, ma’am,” Still said, just as quietly, running her finger back and forth along the groove in her violin.

The principal nodded. “Glad to hear it. Juggling for you this morning, isn’t it? Thought so. Enjoy your class.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Still trudged up the gray limestone steps and into school.

Juggling—what can you say about a room full of young puppets practicing juggling? The air was full of beanbags and Indian clubs, and the *thump* and *bump* of things hitting the floor. The teacher was so plump that his stuffing threatened to burst out at his wrists and ankles, but his hands were quick, and his tongue was quicker. “You there! Lantern! It’s over, over, under, over, under, not over, under, under, over, under! Try starting with your left! Follow, Follow, Follow, what *are* you doing? We’re doing Cross-Eyed Weaver today, not Flock of Ducks! And Still, could you—oh. Never mind.”

A few of the children glanced over at Still curiously when the teacher cut himself off and turned his perpetual disappointment on someone else. She stood in her usual place near the wall. Beanbags, three big knives (with dulled edges, of course—they wouldn’t be juggling real knives until next year), and a pair of clubs lay on the table beside her. Instead of juggling, though, she just tossed a beanbag from hand to hand. Up it went, exactly as high as her eyes, then down on the other side. Up... and down... Up... and down... If anyone else had

done that, the teacher would have roared like a volcano. Instead, he almost seemed embarrassed.

*Plang... plang...* The bell rang. “Everything back where it belongs before you go!” the teacher bellowed. Still put her beanbag back on the table, then picked up her books and violin. She jumped slightly when the teacher spoke.

“Those were, um, yes, those were good tosses,” he said. “Nice and even. Just the right height.” He patted her shoulder awkwardly. “See if you can do that with a full set tomorrow, all right?”

“Yes, sir,” Still said quietly. He patted her shoulder again, then bent over with a creak to pick up a dropped club as she stepped out into the corridor.

Flurry and Pirouette were waiting for her with their books clutched in their arms. “What was *that* all about?” “Are you still sick?” they asked simultaneously.

Still shook her head. “I’m fine,” she lied. Without even thinking about it, she had turned her violin around so that the groove was hidden against her chest.

They stared at the dent on her face. “Ow, what did you *do*?” asked Flurry.

“Are you going to putty it?” asked Pirouette.

Still shook her head again. “I don’t remember. My mother said I could put putty on it if I wanted to, or leave it like this. It’s up to me.”

Flurry blinked. “What do you mean, you don’t remember?”

Pirouette pouted. “Oh, my mother would *never* let me leave something like that.”

But Still was already walking away to her next class. Her friends looked at her retreating back in astonishment. The Pirouette grabbed Flurry’s arm, pulled her close, and whispered in her ear. Flurry’s eyes went wide. She started to giggle.

History was next. They had apparently finished the Age of Slavery, and were starting on the life of Key the Cutter. She

was the first puppet to walk free, the only one who ever cut her own strings. She had been the city's first mayor, but one day she simply vanished. Some puppets thought it meant the world was going to end, but it carried on, day by day, and Key slowly became a legend.

Everyone knew all that, but apparently they had to study it anyway. Still opened her book, then flipped through the pages without hearing a word that the teacher was saying.

*Plang... plang...* and it was noon. The corridors were instantly full of young puppets laughing, chattering, grumbling, and arguing. Flurry and Pirouette ambushed her at her locker. "So are you going to tell us what *really* happened?" Pirouette asked slyly.

Still looked at her friend's feet. "I don't remember," she said. "I think I fell down. When it was raining."

Still glanced up. For just a moment, something more than just a mis-step on a wet day showed in her eyes. Flurry would have stopped right there, but Pirouette was already talking. "I think that you've got a *boyfriend*," she teased. "I think *that's* why you're being so dreamy. *You* probably just did that to make yourself look more *interesting*. I wish *my* parents would let me get dents." The pout on her face had never seemed more fitting.

Still's hand tightened on the neck of her violin. She realized with a shock that she was just a heart-tick away from smashing it over her friend's head! She trembled for a moment, then fumbled her history books into her locker and pulled out her abacus and the novel they were doing in reading. "I have to go," she said in a rush. As she hurried away, she heard Pirouette say, "See? I *told* you so!"

There was a place in the schoolyard where generations of young puppets had gone to be left alone. It wasn't an official place—there were no lines around it, and there was no sign. It just happened to be right beneath the staff room window. You couldn't play loud games there, or make jokes about the

teachers, or swear, but you couldn't be bullied or teased either. There were even a few old crates to sit on, left there by some long-forgotten teacher who remembered what it was like to need a place like that.

Still sat down on one of them, laid her violin in her lap, and opened her novel on top of it. The sun was so bright that it hurt to look straight at the book's pages, but she flipped through them anyway. She heard voices, and balls being bounced, and a murmur of conversation through the window above her, but it all slipped over her, like a stream running over a rock.

The hour passed. The bell rang. Still closed her eyes until the sunspots stopped dancing in front of them, then went back into the school. Her friends whispered to her during arithmetic, but Still clacked the balls of her abacus back and forth to drown them out. When the teacher asked her a question in reading, she said, "I'm sorry, I haven't read that part yet." He didn't bother her again.

*Plang... plang...* Two dozen students made a dash for their lockers. The twenty-fifth gathered her books together slowly, then walked out with her head down. Her teacher watched her go. *It's none of my business*, he told himself. *Children bump and scrap themselves all the time—it's just part of growing up.*

Still's footsteps echoed around her as she walked toward the door. They were almost as loud as the thought that had been echoing in her head all day. "They'll put strings on you... They'll put strings on you..."

Out the door, down the steps, across the yard to the street... Still had come this way a thousand times. But that afternoon, she didn't turn left for home. Instead, she set her books on the sidewalk for anyone who wanted them and kept going straight.

## *Chapter 4*

**Still walked and walked.** She paid no attention to where she was going—she just let her own weight carry her downhill.

The streets grew narrower as she walked, then dirtier. Gaps appeared between the cobblestones. Little tendrils of fog filled the air around her. They thickened steadily, until Still could barely see from one side of the street to the other.

As the fog thickened, the buildings around her changed. The paint on the shop signs grew more garish, then faded and peeled. The steps in front of the houses became worn by hard use. The little paper flower gardens in front of the houses shrank, then vanished, to be replaced by plots of dirt filled with thrown-away paper cups and unlucky lottery tickets.

The puppets around her changed as well. Their faces became cracked and worn. Some had so little paint left that it was impossible to tell who they were, or how they might feel. If their clothes looked new, they looked cheap as well. If they weren't new, they were carefully mended, or ragged at the cuffs. No-one looked straight at her, or said hello.

Finally Still found herself facing a blank brick wall at the end of an alley. It was dark. She was tired and hungry—too tired and hungry to walk another step. An old banana crate lined with newspapers lay in the corner. She climbed into it, curled herself around her violin, and fell straight into a deep, dreamless sleep.

She woke with a start in the middle of the night. Something cold and hard had scampered across her leg. She hugged her knees to her chest. “Tee hee,” the something giggled. She shivered. She had never seen a glass rat, but had heard whispered stories at sleepovers. What they wanted more than

anything was oil to stop them squeaking, and if the only place to get it was from a puppet, well, that was why they had diamond teeth. Still had shivered with fright.

It took her a long time to get back to sleep.

She woke up hungry the next morning. The sun was trying to break through the fog, but it was a battle the sun was used to losing. Still ached. Her wood felt damp all the way through. She stood with a groan. Her arms and legs felt like they had warped overnight. What she really needed was a hot mug of machine oil to warm up her clockwork. A mug of machine oil, and—

She patted her pockets. They were as empty as the box she had slept in. She didn't have any candy, not a single gumdrop. She shook her head. The first thing was to find some oil—she could worry about how to pay for it later.

Still tucked her violin under her arm and set off. She couldn't remember the twists and turns that had brought her to the alley, so she turned or went straight at whim. Nothing moved around her. The breeze that stirred the fog wasn't strong enough to disturb the trash on the street. There were no other puppets to be seen.

Not, that is, until she turned a corner and nearly bumped into an ancient puppet wearing a raincoat. “Arp!” he snapped. “Radda rrrr... Numbler.” He shook his head from side to side and pushed his squeaky-wheeled baby carriage past her. It was piled high with boxes, bottles, and bags, all of them stuffed full to the brim with the tattered remains of burst balloons.

“Excuse me,” Still said weakly. The old puppet snorted and rattled away. Still shivered. His face had been worn almost smooth by repeated sanding and painting, and the wiring that held his jaw on was almost rusted through. She *really* needed that cup of oil now...

Still walked a little more quickly after that. Soon there were other puppets on the street, tidy or tattered or a mix of both.

They all seemed to be headed in the same direction, so she followed along.

She crossed an old stone bridge over a canal. A block later, she found herself on the edge of a market square. It was the size of a city block, and filled with carts and stalls and sound. And puppets—so many puppets.

Someone bumped into her from behind. “’Scuse me,” he muttered, not slowing down. She stepped out of the way and let the world flow past her until her clockwork stopped racing.

Hunger drove her to move again a few minutes later—hunger, and the smell of hot oil somewhere nearby. Hesitantly, still hugging her violin tight to her chest, she stepped into the crowd and set off to find the source of the aroma.

Puppets jostled her on every side as she wandered back and forth across the wet cobblestones. Carpets and coat racks, watch straps and joint wire, gloves, hats, glow-in-the-dark paint for your face or your home, peacock feathers and dishtowels and junk, junk, junk, but not a single scrap to eat or drink. Oh, she could *see* people drinking their morning oil, or wolfing down stuffing with forks or chopsticks, but where were they *selling* it?

Finally she couldn’t take it any longer. “Excuse me,” she said to a burly stool maker in knee-high boots and an apron, “But can you please tell me where you got that?” He was slurping thick, dark oil from a dented pewter mug.

“What, this? Down that way, second left, right, right again where the eggery used to be. Kettle’s is there, and Wing’s. Neither’s worse than the other.” He slurped another mouthful of oil from his mug, then set it down on his workbench, picked up his hammer, and whacked another peg into the stool he was working on.

Still walked the way he had pointed. She took the second left, but was immediately lost. Did this bend to the right count as a right turn? Or was she supposed to follow the bend, then turn right further along?



She stopped in front of a balloon seller who had just finished the last of her morning grease. “Excuse me,” Still said once again, “But I’m looking for Kettle’s, or Wing’s. Can you please tell me—”

“Down there,” the balloon seller said, pointing with her spoon.

“Do I have to turn left or right?” Still asked.

The balloon seller shook her head, scraping the last of her breakfast out of its little cardboard carton. She tossed the carton into the air. A parrot who had been perched on the roof of her stall swooped down and caught it before it hit the ground. As Still walked away, it was happily tearing the carton to shreds with its porcelain beak.

Still didn’t need the balloon seller’s directions any more after her first dozen steps. The smell of hot oil and grease was so strong, it was like a whirlpool pulling her in.

Kettle’s was a little shack with a counter and awning. Wing’s was a pushcart mounted on two fat-tired bicycle wheels. The lineup in front of Kettle’s was shorter, so Still went there.

Kettle herself was short and round. “What will you have, dearie?” she asked.

“Just some oil, please,” Still said. “Only—I don’t have any candy. Not with me.”

Kettle shook her head. “Sorry.” She looked past Still to the gangly puppet standing behind her. “What about you?”

Still hesitated, then stepped out of the way. The gangly puppet put two gumdrops down on the counter. “Double oil, double grease.” He glanced sidelong at Still, then looked back at Kettle. Kettle shrugged as if to say, it’s none of my business. The gangly puppet shrugged back.

The sight of the thick lumps of grease floating in the gangly puppet’s oil made Still feel weak. She hurried over to the line in front of Wing’s. He was no taller than Kettle, but skinny where she had been round, and had little dragons etched on his

forearms. “Just some oil,” Still told him. *Fssshhhhh*... It streamed out of the tap as he pumped the handle. She took the cup from him and gulped down a scalding mouthful. It nearly stripped the varnish off her lips, but it felt so good sliding down her throat and into her clockwork.

“Two gumdrop,” Wing said.

Still nodded. “I’ll just go get it,” she said.

Wing’s arm shot out as quick as the balloon seller’s parrot. “Two gumdrop,” he insisted, his hand on her collar. “No free ride.”

“I said, I’ll go get it,” she insisted, trying to sound annoyed, but only managing to sound frightened. She tried to shake off his hand, but his grip was like a vice.

“Oh, there you are!” The gangly puppet from Kettle’s appeared beside her as if by magic. “Honestly, if your head wasn’t screwed on... Ah, here we go.” He fished two lint-covered purple gumdrops out of his pockets and handed them to Wing. “Good enough?”

“Hmph,” Wing snorted, but he took the gumdrops.

“Thank you,” Still said. “I really did just forget to...” Her voice trailed off. She felt like she was going to start crying.

“That’s all right,” the gangly puppet said easily. “It was found candy anyway. Must have fallen out of someone’s pocket last night. Why, I practically tripped over them this morning. Could have been a very nasty spill. Vicious things, gumdrops, really. Probably best to have gotten rid of them, what?”

Still smiled weakly. “Probably,” she nodded.

“I’m Attic, by the way,” the other puppet said, adjusting his glasses. “I, um, books. I’m a bookseller. Down that way. And you are...?”

“Thank you, Attic,” Still said. She sipped at her oil. It tasted like it had been lying in the bottom of a rusty old can for a month, but it was delicious nonetheless.

Attic blinked. “Yes, well, um, you’re welcome. And if you need anything to read, um, I’m just down that way.”

“I’ll remember,” she promised.

She spent the morning wandering through the market. It wasn’t as large as it seemed—the fog just made it impossible to see everything at once. She hung onto the cup from Wing’s even after the last of the oil was gone. When the noon bell rang, she sat on the lip of a dry fountain on the market’s edge and tore the cup apart so that she could lick the cardboard.

The market was quieter in the afternoon than in the morning. Still moved to the steps in front of a bricked-up bakery door across from the dry fountain and tried not to think about how hungry she was. Her gears ground painfully against one another inside her chest. It was all she could do to keep her eyes open...

She woke with a start. Someone was shaking her. Where was she? She blinked and squinted up at the puppet in front of her. He let go of her shoulder and stepped back.

“I said, are you all right?” he repeated. He had broad shoulders and a cocky smile, and was wearing a gold and green uniform and roller skates. “You look like you’ve been into a bad can of paint.”

“What? No, I’m fine,” Still said. “I’m just tired.”

“Oh really? Huh.” He twirled around on his skates. “Are you new here?”

Still nodded, hugging her violin to her chest. She wondered if somehow some sand had gotten into her gears. It certainly felt like it.

“Yeah, figured.” The other puppet picked both feet up and put them back down crossed-over, *bang!*, then did it again to straighten them out. “Anyway, case you don’t know, brooms do a sweep at sundown. Pick up the trash.” He did another quick twirl. “You’re sitting here, they’ll pick you up too. Mail you back wherever you came from, most likely.”

“What? I’m sorry, I don’t understand.” Still shook her head.

The roller skater sighed theatrically. “The police. They come around when everyone’s closing up. I’m just thinking, maybe you want to be ‘just tired’ somewhere else when they do.”

Still nodded miserably and struggled to her feet. She realized that she still had the remains of the cardboard cup in her hand. She looked around for a trash bin.

The other puppet’s grin grew wider. “Just chuck it,” he said. “No-one’ll notice.”

Still hesitated a second, then dropped the cup beside the stairs. “Thanks for telling me,” she said, wiping her hand on her pants.

The roller-skater bowed. “Anything for a pretty girl,” he said. He winked, then twirled around.

“Wait!” Still said. The puppet looked back at her over his shoulder. “I don’t suppose... I could borrow a couple of gumdrops? For some oil?”

The roller-skater shrugged apologetically. “Sorry. Flat empty. Have a job tomorrow, though. Try me then?” He winked again and skated away without waiting for an answer.

“Sure,” Still said quietly, bitterly, despairingly. “Tomorrow. Oh, I’m so *hungry*.” She could practically *hear* her gears grinding. She just *had* to find something to eat.

She walked back through the market. Surely somebody must have thrown out a few scraps of stuffing, or a jar of oil that was only half-empty. But no luck—people were closing up shutters, taking down awnings, rolling up carpets, and putting boxes and barrels away, but nobody was throwing anything away. All she found was a battered cardboard cup by a stall that advertised cheap second-hand gyroscopes, but there was nothing in it but a stale wisp of lint.

The sun was almost down. The market was almost empty, and she still hadn’t found anything to eat or drink. Without quite thinking about it, she had wandered back toward Kettle’s and Wing’s. Their shutters were closed, and locked with

padlocks the size of Still's hand. The smell of hot oil that hung in the air was driving Still crazy. There had to be a loose board, or a way to pry the shutters apart...

She looked around wildly for a stick to use as a crowbar. Then she froze. Police! Just as the roller skater had said. Three puppets in blue uniforms, walking slowly through the market, nodding at stragglers, rattling locks and rattling to make sure they were secure.

Still ducked around behind Kettle's stall. "They'll put strings on you if they find out!" said the voice in her head. "They'll screw little eyehooks into your elbows and knees, and run black silk strings through them, and they'll never let you move your own arms and legs again."

She wanted to run, but instead she just walked very, very fast, head down, violin clutched to her chest, straight out of the market. "You can't see me," she whispered. "I'm not here."

She didn't slow down until she was half a dozen blocks away. Most of the streetlights overhead had burned out. The few that were left were barely strong enough to cut through the fog. Little feet splashed through the gutter beside the street, and slow wings went *flap, flap, flap* over her head. She shivered. This was no place to spend the night. She ought to go somewhere warmer, somewhere with light.

She kept walking until she spotted a little diner. Puppets of all shapes and sizes sat on stools at its single long counter, sipping hot oil or picking at grease, talking about the day's deals or reading newspapers.

Still tiptoed down the alley beside the diner. Two big gray garbage cans stood like tired sentries near its back door. She hesitated. It *smelled*. But then her gears ground again, even louder than before. She walked down to the other end of the alley and hid behind a stack of crates.

The city bell rang the half-hour twice while she crouched there, shivering in the fog. She was almost ready to give up when the door opened. A barrel-shaped puppet in a dirty white

apron came out with a cardboard box in his arms. He set it on top of the nearest garbage can, pulled the lid off the second, and—

“What?” he shouted back through the door in answer to a question Still hadn’t heard. He listened for a second, then muttered, “Splinters,” and went back inside.

Still darted forward. Sure enough, the box was full of empty tins. She put her violin in beside them and hurried away with the box in her arms.

A few minutes later she was sitting on some worn stone steps a block away, patiently wiping the last few drops of oil out of the last can with her finger. It wasn’t much, and some of it had gone sludgy, but it stopped her gears from grinding. “And it wasn’t really stealing,” she told herself. “They were throwing it out anyway.”

She sat back, exhausted. A stray gust of wind blew a brief hole in the fog. Still looked up at the moon floating silver and black in the night sky. Everything was lighter there, she remembered, even as her eyelids grew heavy. You could pick someone up with one hand, and throw a shoe all the way to the horizon. She was so tired...

The city bell rang midnight. Still sat up with a start and shook her head to clear it. She couldn’t fall asleep, not here out in the open. She would be safer on the other side of the canal, where there were fewer passers-by.

The streets were empty now, and silent except for the lonely *ting, ting* of a streetcar bell in the distance. She turned right onto the old stone bridge that arched over the canal. Halfway across it she slowed, then stopped. Was someone watching her?

She leaned against the bridge’s wrought iron railing and glanced left, then right. Nothing. No-one was there. She sagged slightly, then shook her head. It was just her imagination.

Then she saw it. A little white paper boat was bobbing up and down in the water below her. The current carried it slowly toward the bridge. Still stumbled back from the railing, hugging her violin to her chest. She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, then turned and ran the rest of the way across the bridge.

She walked through one lonely street after another, trying to find the crate she had slept in the night before, but the fog had grown thicker again. Each corner looked like the next. She finally spotted an old mailbox that she had walked past that morning. *Close enough*, she thought wearily. Ten steps into the nearest alley, sat down with her back against the wall and was asleep in an instant.

She woke with a start. “Ew!” she exclaimed, scrambling to her feet. Something cold and hard fell off her leg with a soft *thud* and a cold-hearted giggle. “Tee hee,” it went, and from around her she heard some more small voices answer, “Tee hee, tee hee.” She gasped. Glass rats! And not just one this time—a whole scurry of them.

She looked around wildly, her head still fuzzy with sleep. She had no idea how many there were—their transparent bodies were hard enough to see in the daytime, much less in the middle of the night. Should she run for it? Would they chase her? How fast could glass rats run?

Small feet scampered across the ground in front of her. She backed up. “Ow!” Her shoulder hit a drainpipe that ran up the wall to her right. A drainpipe! She grabbed it with one hand and tugged. It seemed strong enough. But what about her violin? How could she hold it and climb the drainpipe at the same time?

She untied her belt and pulled it out of her pants, then slipped the end around the violin’s waist, under its strings. Over her shoulder it went, so that the violin was strapped to her back. She grabbed the drainpipe with both hands and started to climb.

The pipe creaked under her weight, but held. A chorus of cold, disappointed little voices went “Awww,” beneath her. One story, two, three... When her knuckles bumped into a storm gutter, she grabbed it and pulled herself onto the building’s roof.

And nearly jumped off again. A heavy gray figure loomed in the darkness just a few feet away from her. It had a small, beaky head, long arms, and wings folded up against its back. It was a gargoyle!

It was just an old gargoyle, weathered and worn. She laughed weakly, then untied her belt and hugged her violin. She was safe, at least for now. Nothing was going to chew her to bits and drink her oil. No-one was going to put strings on her. She was safe. She was safe...

With her back against a chimney, watched over by the moon, the fog, and an old gargoyle, Still went back to sleep.



## *Chapter 5*

**S**he woke up hungry and cold the next morning. The sun had already risen, though the ever-present fog was still thick enough to blur the world's edges. Her need for oil was like a hard lump in her clockwork. She groaned at the creaking and cracking of her joints as she stood up.

The gargoyle still brooded over the street below. She patted it for luck, then strapped her violin onto her back again and climbed down the drainpipe.

Once on the ground, she rubbed the grit out of her eyes with the back of her hand. She had to get some candy, but how? The only place she could think of was the market, but she didn't have anything to sell. She felt so alone. She just wanted to go—to go—

The fog suddenly seemed to thicken. Her thoughts darted away from wherever it had been about to go like a fly escaping a hungry frog. "They'll put strings on you," she whispered.

Still trudged wearily across the old stone bridge and through the city streets to the market. It was already bustling with watchmakers, sawdust grinders, and even an old window cleaner. She watched him for a few minutes as he carefully wiped the smudges off the rectangle of glass in his lap. When he paused for a moment's rest, she edged a little closer, so that her shadow fell across him.

The window cleaner looked up at her and smiled. "Yes, miss, can I help you?" Deep gouges, old enough to have been weathered smooth, ran down one cheek. The eye on that side was just a blank jade marble.

"I was, um, I was actually wondering if I could help you," Still said hesitantly. She pointed at the window resting across his knees. "With that."

“With this?” the window cleaner asked, puzzled, tapping the window *tick tick* with the tip of his finger.

“Or with those ones.” Still pointed at the half-dozen windows stacked neatly in the rear of his stall. “You wouldn’t even have to give me any candy, just some oil or something.”

“Oooh.” The window cleaner nodded. “You mean, do I want an assistant?” His nod turned into a regretful shake.

“Well, thank you for asking, but there’s hardly enough business here to keep me fed, to tell you the truth. There just aren’t many proper windows left any more—everybody’s putting in disposable ones instead. Sorry.”

“Well, thanks anyway,” Still said. The window cleaner smiled at her again, then bent back over his work.

Still stopped at a carpeteer’s stall next. The burly puppet who ran it just laughed at her. “A slip of a thing like you?” he asked. “How’d you ever lift a full roll? Or even a half roll, eh? Here, grab a handful of this.” He rolled up his sleeve and offered Still his arm. “Go on,” he grinned.

She reached out hesitantly and squeezed his upper arm. “Pure teak, that is,” the carpeteer said proudly. “And cast iron hinges, all through. None of your brass or aluminum in me. Here, watch.” He bent down to take hold of a roll of carpet half against as tall as Still, and as thick around as he was himself.

“See?” he grunted, heaving it up onto his shoulder. “Six flights of stairs I can do with this, not stop once.” He dropped the frayed red and gold carpet back onto the canvas sheet in front of his stall with a *thump* and wiped his hands on his smock. “Now, when you can lift half that, for half as long, you come back and see me, all right?”

Still nodded and turned to go. “But hold up,” the carpeteer said. “What about that? It has to be worth something, hasn’t it?” He pointed at her violin.

“What do you mean?” Still asked.

The burly carpeteer shrugged. “Well, it looks practically brand new. Plenty of places here would give you good licorice for something like that.”

“But it’s not for sale,” Still said quickly. She took a step backwards. “It’s not—I couldn’t.”

“Ease up, ease up,” the carpeteer said. He patted the air with his hands. “If it’s not for sale, it’s not for sale, is it? Just a thought, that was.” He lowered his hands and cocked his head to one side. “Wouldn’t be, um, borrowed, would it? Without the original owner’s knowledge?”

“No, no, it’s mine,” Still said. “I really should go now, I—”

“Well, if it’s yours, you must know how to play it.” The carpeteer took a step toward her, smiling like a crocodile. “And there’s plenty of folk around here who like good music. Mm hm, plenty of folk who think a good tune is worth a bit of candy.”

“I really have to go,” Still whispered. She turned and stumbled away, hugging her violin close.

“Silly girl!” the carpeteer said loudly to her retreating back. “If you won’t sell it, and you won’t play it, what good is it to you? Or anyone else?” He shook his head, then picked up his cutting shears and went back to work.

An hour later, Still sat down on the edge of the dry fountain and buried her face in her hands. She had tried Kettle’s (“Hardly room enough in here for me.”), a tailor’s (“Gracious, an apprentice? Oh, I don’t really think so.”), and the balloon seller she had spoken to the day before (“No license? Then you shouldn’t even ask, should you?”). She had even helped a rickety old fortune teller in a red-and-white checked shirt set up her table and chairs, only to have her snap, “I’m not a charity, you know!” when Still asked if she might have any oil to spare.

The balloon seller suggested she play her violin as well. The look on Still’s face must have made her feel a bit guilty, so she said, “Look, everybody loves music. You must love music, too,

or you wouldn't have such a beautiful fiddle, right? So pick a corner and play!"

But she couldn't. She just couldn't. She didn't want to think about playing, and she didn't even want to think about *why* she didn't want to think about playing. It was like a jack-in-the-box in her mind. If she opened the lid, something would jump out and scare her.

And so she found herself on the edge of the fountain with her face in her hands and her gears dry-grinding inside her. The morning breeze had turned blustery. Withered paper leaves and old bits of cellophane waltzed across the cobblestones, fell still for a moment, then picked themselves up and resumed their tired dance. A sheet of newspaper sailed majestically across the open square in front of her. It collided with the fountain next to her feet with a gentle crunch.

Still picked it up and smoothed it out on her legs. There were pictures of the new city that was being built on the moon, and a story about a child who had disappeared after school the day before. She didn't read either. Instead, she folded the newspaper to make a box with crisp creases, and set it on the cobblestones in front of her. The wind tried to pick it up again, but Still weighted down its corners with pebbles.

Still gently laid her violin on the cobblestones beside the paper box. She stood up slowly. The wind felt like cold water on the dent on her cheek. Slowly, very slowly, she ducked her head down, as if she had a violin on her shoulder. Slowly, ever so slowly, she raised her arm as if she held a bow.

And began to play, with nothing but air in her hands. A few puppets stopped to watch, and then a few more. They stared at the strange sight of a young, beautifully-painted puppet playing a violin that wasn't there. Still didn't make a sound, but the puppets around her would have sworn that they felt something sad and wild wash through their gears. It made one puppet think of black butterflies fluttering among poppies. It made another think of a hawk circling patiently over a snowy

field in winter, just waiting for the rabbit's clockwork to run down. Some puppets thought of where they'd come from, and others of where they'd always wanted to go. Some thought of the last time they had seen a close friend, and others of their first balloon ride as a child. Still's silence let everyone hear something different, and made everyone shiver.

When Still stopped, the puppets around her sighed. A peg-legged soldier pulled a green gumdrop from his pocket, picked off some of the lint, and tossed it into Still's paper box. A handful of others followed it, *plop plop plop*. Still bowed gracefully, then picked up her takings and stuffed them into her pockets. She was shaking, and the scar on her face ached, but at last she had some candy. She picked up her violin and went to get some oil.

"Two cups," Still said. "And may I please have some grease as well?" Wing glowered at her suspiciously. Still plunked her gumdrops down on the top of his little pushcart defiantly.

The skinny puppet picked them up and squeezed them. "Hm. Real," he grunted. The dragon etched on his forearm seemed to wink at Still. The candy disappeared into his apron. He handed Still two steaming mugs of murky oil and a little squeeze tube of grease.

"Thank you," Still said. "And do you know where a bookseller named Attic is?"

"Other side, over there," Wing said, pointing past Still's shoulder.

She thanked him again and set off through the market, sipping her oil as she walked. She almost felt bubbly, though the dent on her face still ached. Her shoulders ached, too, from playing empty air, but she didn't want to think about that, not now, not when the oil was warming her insides, and the sun was brightening the fog to pearl-gray. It seemed lighter than it had been before she played. She wondered why that was, then let the thought slip from her mind.

Still had finished the first cup of oil by the time she found Attic's stall, and the second had gone tepid. He had his glasses in his hand, and was poking another puppet in the chest with them to emphasize his points. The other puppet, whose face was almost perfectly rectangular, was laughing. As Still watched, Attic's poking slowed, then stopped, and he started to laugh too.

"All right, all right, it wasn't very bright of me not to check," Attic said. "But please don't do it again, all right? She was madder than a ruffled duck when she opened it the next morning and all the pages were blank. If I hadn't given her a folio of pressed leaves for her grandchildren, she would have set the brooms on me!"

"Oh, Attic, come on," the other puppet said. "A folio of leaves? When has something like that ever graced your shelves?"

"I actually had two," the gangly bookseller admitted. He glanced around to see if anyone was listening. His eyes widened slightly when he saw Still, but she just waved a hand as if to say, "Don't mind me."

Attic turned back to the other puppet. "Two," he repeated confidentially, putting his arm around the other puppet's shoulders. "Mint condition. The leaves had never even been put on trees. I still have the other one, if you're interested." He took his arm away and shrugged. "It's not as if *I'll* ever have a customer for it. Don't have that sort coming here."

The square-faced puppet looked up at the sky. "I might know somebody who'd be interested in something like that," he admitted. "Of course, I'd have to see it first, make sure it's everything you say it is."

"Oh, of course, of course," Attic reassured him. "I have it right here. Hang on a tick-tock." He turned and ran a finger along the shelves behind his stall.

"Ah, here we are," he said. He pulled out a bundle wrapped in a tea towel and set it down on the counter. He unfolded the

tea towel to reveal a plain wooden cover stamped with the words “Spring Leaves (April) Series 175”.

“One seventy five?” the square-faced puppet gasped. “But that’s—err, that could be quite nice, actually. Quite nice. I mean, to a collector. Not much value to anyone else.”

“I guessed not,” Attic agreed. “Go ahead, take a look. I think the first page is the nicest, but of course I’m no expert.”

The square-headed puppet nodded and wiped his hands on his trousers. Still edged closer. Some collectors paid pure sugar for a single unused leaf. A whole folio of leaves that had never been out in the wind and the rain, well, she could understand why the square-faced puppet was so excited. Surely Attic must know what something like this was worth?

The square-faced puppet put his hands on the cover of the folio. He brushed his fingers across the title, then leaned over it slightly and opened the cover.

*PAFF!* The flash powder pressed between the pages was as bright as lightning. The square-faced puppet leaped back with a yelp. Still shrieked and jumped too, spilling some of the oil in her cup, and nearly dropping her violin.

Attic started to laugh. “Not very... *bright*... of me, was it?” he gasped. He had to lean against the side of his stall to stop from falling in a heap, he was laughing so hard. “Not checking for re-invisible ink, I mean? Not... very... *bright*...”

The square-faced puppet growled at him, then started to laugh as well. “All right, all right,” he finally said. He stuck out his hand and pulled Attic (who hadn’t been able to keep himself from slumping down onto the cobblestones) back to his feet. “So what did it *really* cost you? I’m good for it, you know.”

“I know, I know,” Attic said. He clapped the other puppet on the shoulder. “She traded it for a picture book biography of Key, some corners folded, small crayon scribble inside the back cover. Fair deal?”

“Fair deal,” the other puppet agreed. They shook hands solemnly. Chuckling once more, the other puppet turned and left.

Attic put his glasses back on and turned to Still. “Sorry for making you wait,” he said. “Just some unfinished business. What can I do for you?”

“I don’t know,” Still replied. “I’m not sure whether I want invisible ink or exploding pages.”

“Ah, um, yes.” The innocent, teasing tone he had used with the square-faced puppet had vanished. Instead, he seemed to be blushing out loud. “Well. I do some real books too. Histories, novels, um, fishing—do you like fishing? No, me neither, but some of the books are just splendid.”

Still smiled. “I’m not actually looking for any books right now,” she said. “I just wanted to give you this.” She handed him the half-empty cup of oil. “I think it’s gone cold. And I spilled some when your—when the book—”

“Oh, that’s all right, that’s fine,” Attic said hastily. He took the cup of oil from her and slurped it. “I don’t like it as hot as most, and, um, well, a big lunch would just make me sleepy. This is just right. Thank you. But you didn’t have to do this, you know. It really was found candy.”

“That’s all right,” Still said.

There was an awkward pause. Still was just about to say, “Well, goodbye then,” when a voice behind her said, “Gangway! Whoops! Oh hey, it’s you!”

The roller skater from the day before did a tight turn and stopped in front of her. His gold-and-green uniform almost seemed to glow next to the worn paint on Attic’s stall. “You got some oil. Great. Sorry about yesterday. I was flat, flat, flat. Not any more, though. Look at this.” He pulled half of a licorice whip out of his pocket. “Sweet stuff, eh?” He twirled around. “Buy you lunch, if you want.” He winked at Still. She smiled back.



“Oh dear,” Attic said loudly. He crossed his arms and leaned against the side of his stall. “What happened, did a balloon crash?”

“Oh, hi, Attic,” the roller skater said. “Didn’t see you. Must have been dazzled.” He winked at Still again. “So what do you say?”

“No, really, I’m curious.” Attic straightened up, but didn’t uncross his arms. “What happened?”

The roller skater waved a hand. “They’re closing a library uptown. One of the old ones. I had to tell the patrons.”

“Closing a library?” Still gasped. “Why, that’s horrible! They shouldn’t do that!”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Attic pushed his glasses up his nose. “It’s good for business, all those old books to buy. And all those people needing something to read.”

“Oh!” Still was outraged, and the fact that neither Attic nor the roller skater seemed to mind the library closing just made her angrier. Libraries were—they were special, that’s what they were. They were cool, quiet places where you could sit and read stories about faraway places, without anything bad happening. She pulled back from that thought as if it had singed her. She didn’t want to think—she *couldn’t* think—about bad things happening.

“So do you always give people bad news?” she asked the roller skater.

“Every chance I get,” the roller skater confirmed. “The worse the better—pays more. But it’s just for now. I’m saving up. Going to the moon.”

Still saw Attic roll his eyes and shake his head. She smiled at the roller skater. “Really?” she asked.

“Absolutely,” he said confidently. “Bound to be bad news up there, just like here. Or whatever. Maybe even run the mail. They’ll have mail. I bet I’d be the fastest mail runner on the moon.” He rose up on the front wheels of his skates and balanced there, grinning. “It’s all the skating,” he confided.

“Keeps my joints limber. Not like standing around all day in a stall. Do you skate?”

“I’ve never tried,” Still confessed.

“No? Easy as slipping on ice. Bunch of us stunt up by the fountain. Where you were yesterday. Come by some time. Be happy to teach you.” He whirled around again and was off.

Still turned back to Attic. “Well, he’s quite a character,” she said.

“Quite,” he agreed sourly. “Crest-of-the-Wave, he calls himself now. Used to be just plain old Crest, but I guess that’s not a grand enough name for someone with such a nice jacket.”

“I guess,” Still said. “Anyway, thanks again for the oil yesterday.”

“You’re welcome. Stop by again some time if you like.” Attic watched Still as she walked away, then sighed and went back to his books.

Still spent the next few hours exploring the market and the narrow streets around it. She watched two bickering puppets dismantle a staircase and load it on a cart. Ten minutes later and two blocks away, she almost tripped over a raggedy puppet who had fallen asleep studying a position laid out on a chess board. Laundry lines hung criss-cross in alleys; children traded marbles for glow-in-the-dark rings, which they then traded back for more marbles. Everything was run down and dirty, yet full of life.

She wandered past the dry fountain a couple of times, hoping to see Crest-of-the-Wave. Some other roller skaters were there, but not him. The second time, she took a left turn instead of a right and found herself on an unfamiliar street. It opened onto a parade square, in the middle of which stood an old band shell. There were holes in its curved roof, and rubbish piled in its corners, but Still felt herself drawn to it.

She hopped up onto its stage and turned around. The conductor would have stood here, with the band behind him.

He would have bowed to the audience before turning and tapping his baton on the podium. They would all have dressed in black and white, or perhaps in bright parade uniforms. Blue and orange uniforms, perhaps, with polka-dot hats, and—

Still suddenly felt dizzy. She mustn't think about, about whatever she had just been thinking about. She shook her head to clear it and hopped down from the stage.

"Hey! Fancy meeting you here!" She whirled around. It was the carpeteer. He was standing by the band shell wall, his burly arms crossed, an unpleasant leer on his face.

"Hi," she said uncertainly. "I was just..."

"Looking for a place to play?" He straightened up and uncrossed his arms. "I heard you were playing this afternoon. I'm sorry I missed it."

"I wasn't playing." Still hesitated. "Not really."

"Mm, yes, that's what I heard. Seems a real shame, a fiddle as nice as that one just lying around. Probably be best all around if you gave it to someone who'd actually play it, don't you think?" The carpeteer straightened up and uncrossed his arms. "Like me, for instance. I'd play it every day."

"I really should be going," Still whispered. She turned to go, but the carpeteer caught her arm before she took her second step.

"I'll pay you for it." His voice was low and urgent. "I've got half a licorice in my pocket right now. You can have that."

"Please..." Still tried to shake off his arm, but he was too strong. She looked around wildly. There! Over there!

"Crest!" she shouted. "Crest-of-the-Wave!"

The carpeteer glanced across the square. "Mold!" he cursed. Crest-of-the-Wave and two other roller skaters were racing toward them. He let go of Still's arm. "You just think about it," he said. "That's all I'm asking. It's a fair deal." He turned and hurried away.

Crest-of-the-Wave braked beside her. "Problem?" he asked. His friends stopped a few feet away.

“It’s all right,” Still lied. “He—he wanted my violin.”

“So what did you tell him?”

“Oh!” Still’s jaw dropped. She shook her head. “I said no. I couldn’t. I *wouldn’t*.”

“Course not,” Crest-of-the-Wave said, sounding shocked. One of the other roller skaters snorted. Crest-of-the-Wave shot him a scowl. “You’d better keep that somewhere safe. He’s not the only one who’ll want to play with it.” He twirled around. “Anyway, I made up a new stunt today. Want to see it?”

“Um, sure.” Still shook her head. Where could she keep her violin? Not in the market—someone would be sure to find it. Could she hide it on the rooftop where she had slept the night before? It didn’t look like anyone else ever went there. She could wrap it up in newspapers, and tuck it under the eaves, or behind the gargoyle. Yes, that was it—she would put it behind the gargoyle. That’s what they were for, wasn’t it? Guarding things?

“Well, come on.” Crest-of-the-Wave hopped sideways impatiently. “Boards are set up on the fountain. Have to do it there.”

“Oh. Um, all right.” Still smiled. She still felt shaken, but for some reason, the thought of the gargoyle watching over her violin made her feel better. “Sure. Let’s go have a look at this trick of yours.”

## Chapter 6

**L**eaving her violin behind was harder than she had expected. The first day, she turned around three blocks from the alley, climbed back up, and unwrapped it, just to make sure it was safe. By the end of the week, though, she could almost convince herself that her heart didn't skip a tick each time she went away.

Her days quickly fell into a pattern. She woke, stretched, wrapped her violin in the newspapers she had slept on the night before, and hid it under the eaves behind the old gargoyle. That done, she climbed down the drainpipe, walked to the market, and bought a cup of hot oil with the last of the previous day's gumdrops. As it warmed her, she wandered around to look at the fans, bootlaces, second-hand screwdrivers, and whatever else was on sale that day.

Her wanderings always ended at Attic's. The gangly puppet smiled every time he saw her, even on days when the fog was wet and warping. They chatted about nothing in particular while he opened up his stall—had he seen the pink feather boa that the window cleaner was wearing? Had she heard that Kettle might be leaving the market to become a ship's cook? And always, did he have any new books? About Key the Cutter?

Still read everything she could find about Key. If asked, she would have said it was because Key was a hero, and ought to be an inspiration to everyone. In truth, she read and read because she wanted to figure out *how* Key had cut her own strings, just in case she ever needed to do it herself. The little voice in her head was quiet, but she remembered it saying, "They'll put strings on you if they find out." The words frightened her so much that she never let herself go past them

to ask why. It was as if her whole life up until her first night in the alley was a book that she left on the shelf, unopened and unread.

Attic always smiled when she asked for books about Key, even though he wondered, and worried, at her obsession. He had tried a couple of times to find out where she was from. “Oh, from all over,” she said lightly. “But that was a long time ago. A band of pirates kidnapped me when I was very young.”

“And did they sell you to a pride of lions, so that you could scratch them under their chins when they weren’t hunting?” Attic asked, amused.

“No, of course not,” Still said severely. “That’s just a children’s story. *These* pirates were real. They put me to work in a glue mine. I had to dig and dig, every single day. All I ever got to eat was crank case grease. I would have worn out completely and fallen to pieces if I hadn’t escaped.”

“And how *did* you escape?” Still’s off-handed tone made Attic uneasy. Surely she couldn’t be telling the truth—not in this day and age. But she didn’t sound like she was joking...

“Oh, that’s a secret. What if they captured me again, and they’d found out how I got away the first time? Then I really would be stuck there.”

“Hm.” Attic nodded slowly. “And what about your violin?”

Still turned a page in the book she was looking at. “What do you mean?” she asked neutrally.

“The violin you had that first day at Kettle’s and Wing’s. I haven’t seen you with it since. Did you sell it?”

Just then the city bells rang mid-day. Still closed the book with a snap, leaped to her feet, and handed it back to Attic.

“Thanks,” she said. “See you tomorrow.” He opened his mouth to say, “Sure, any time,” or maybe, “I’m sorry for asking—I didn’t know it would upset you,” but she was already ten paces away.

Attic never asked her about her past again, or about the violin. A lot of people in the market didn’t like to talk about

where they'd come from, or how they'd wound up selling cracked mugs or mending old songs to make a living. Attic drummed his fingers on the counter of his stall. Truth was, he didn't much like thinking about how he'd come to be there either...

By the time the city bells rang noon, the market was always filled with puppets of all shapes and sizes. Still went to her usual place in front of the dry fountain, folding up a stray sheet of newspaper to make a little box. After setting it at her feet, she closed her eyes and bowed her head. Slowly, very slowly, she brought her arms up into position: left arm out, palm up, elbow bent, as if she was cradling something precious. Right elbow up, wrist loose, and slowly, very slowly, in complete silence, she began her silent performance.

Passing puppets always stopped to watch her—always. Some professed to be shocked. “Shameful!” they sniffed, although they kept watching. Others felt a melancholy ache that reminded them of long-lost friends. Still's silence left room for everyone to hear their own hearts. More than one puppet shed oily tears while listening.

The dent in Still's cheek always ached by the time she finished, but there were always a few gumdrops in her cup as well. She never bowed or said thank you. She just picked up her earnings and bought herself some lunch.

Still didn't go back to Attic's in the afternoon. By the time she was finished her mid-day cup of oil, roller skaters had always gathered in the square around the dry fountain. Some looked as if they had been lying in a basement for weeks. Others, like Crest-of-the-Wave, seemed to spend every sugar sprinkle they had on clothes. They looked like giant hummingbirds, darting here and there, calling to each other, every color of the rainbow and a few the rainbow wouldn't have recognized.

Still never skated with them, and Crest-of-the-Wave never mentioned his offer to teach her. She just sat on the lip of the

fountain, or on the steps across from it, happy to make idle conversation with whoever passed by, and just as happy if no-one paid her any attention at all. Crest-of-the-Wave flirted shamelessly with other puppets, but Still didn't mind, because it meant that she didn't have to take him seriously when he winked at her, or talked about what they'd do when she came to visit him on the moon.

She didn't mind the roller skaters' bad language, either, or the cruel jokes about passers-by. What did bother her was how some of them painted and re-painted their faces. One day a puppet would have a stern frown; the next, his face would be wide-eyed with amazement, or weeping with laughter. It wasn't thoughtful or meticulous. They just bought the gaudiest paints they could afford, and made themselves look happy, or sad, or brave, or cunning, without any thought for tomorrow.

Even Crest-of-the-Wave did it sometimes. Whenever several days went by without a job, he spent his last few gumdrops on some paint (or, if he had spent them already, borrowed some paint from one of the other roller skaters). His faces were always ferocious, like a wild animal's. No-one could do stunts like the ones he did when his face was like that. He twisted like an eel, and jumped like a gazelle. It seemed to bring him luck and wear him out at the same time. He was always quiet and withdrawn the next day, but always had candy in his pocket then too.

When the city bells rang for nightfall, Still bought a final cup of oil to drink on her walk home. No, not home—she never let herself use that word. It was just where she slept, and where she kept her violin. Her steps always quickened as she got closer to the drainpipe. Climbing it now seemed as natural as going up a flight of stairs. She took her violin out of its hiding place, turned it over to make sure it hadn't been scratched or warped, then made herself a bed out of the newspapers she had gathered on the way and lay down to sleep with it cradled in her arms.



Most of the puppets who frequented the market lived in the old stone apartment buildings by the canal. Every so often, though, others from the sunny heart of the City ventured down into the fog to visit. The nice ones came to buy old, broken-down things to mend—chairs with wobbly legs, flutes that were missing a few notes, or picture frames that didn't hang straight. Some were collectors, like the serious-looking puppet who came to Attic's stall every week to ask about books on masks. Others were redecorating, or trying to fill up their basements, or just wanted a change of scenery.

The others, who weren't so nice, came for the smell of the fog. They walked around the market in groups, staring at everyone and making snide remarks to one another. Some of them made jokes about Still's silent performances, but even they still left candy in her box: gumdrops, licorice, and once even a small, hard piece of chocolate. One or two of them asked her to come back and play for them in private. Still looked at their bright, shiny eyes and shook her head.

Still didn't like these sunny-side visitors, and avoided them if she could. *What are they doing here?* she thought angrily. *They don't belong here.* But no-one else seemed to mind, so she just buried her nose in whatever book Attic had lent her, or watched the roller skaters, laughing at their jokes while seething inside.

And once, just once, she saw a puppet whose clothes were blue and orange. He had black curls under his polka-dot hat, and a warm smile on his face. He was with a crowd of other puppets, all of them polished to look brand new. As she watched, he laughed at the cans of fish scales that one tired old puppet was trying to sell. "Ah hoo hoo hoo hoo... Ah hee hee hee..."

Still hid behind a pile of old socks until he was gone. When she finally ventured out, she played her silent music faster and more furiously than she ever had before. Her arm practically whirled as it flew back and forth. No-one gave her any candy

that day. Even a few of the puppets who worked in the market muttered about her under their breath.

She was halfway back to her roof that night when the back of her neck suddenly prickled as if she was being watched. She quickened her pace, listening for steps behind her, but heard none. She sped up again until she was almost running. The prickling feeling grew stronger.

Suddenly there was a wall in front of her. She must have taken a wrong turn into a blind alley. Still looked around wildly. There were no drainpipes, no windows, nothing to do but turn around. She closed her eyes and counted to three, willing her clockwork to slow down, just a little, just a little, not realizing that she had balled her hands into fists. She opened her eyes and spun around.

No-one was there. She slowly relaxed. *Well, that was silly, wasn't it?* she scolded herself as she walked back to the mouth of the alley. *Frightening yourself like that over nothing. Why, the next think you know, you'll be jumping every time you hear—"Aah!"* she squeaked.

"Arp! Radda rrrr... Numble." The ancient puppet she had seen on her very first day was standing at the corner, his baby carriage beside him. In his hand he held a length of string, atop which floated a small purple balloon.

"Rrrr..." he tried again. "Rrrr... Right. Frrr... frrr... found this. Trrr... trees. In the trees. It's yerrr... yours." He held it out to her.

"Um, I don't think so," Still said cautiously. "I didn't buy any balloons today."

The ancient puppet shook his head. "Nrrrt... the balloon. The brrrr... brrrr... boat."

Still stared at him blankly, not understanding. Then she saw the little folded paper boat dangling from the bottom of the balloon string. Her clockwork skipped a tick. She reached for it slowly, already knowing what it was. Sure enough, written

on the side were the words, “Have you seen—” She snatched her hand away. *You mustn’t tell... They’ll put strings on you.*

“It’s not mine!” she snapped, stumbling back. “It’s not for me! Leave me alone!” She ran, heedless of where she was going, until finally she had to stop and lean against a building to cry. The fog was so thick that she could barely see the cobblestones beneath her feet. She waited for it to clear a little, then wearily continued on her way.

So the days passed, each colder than the one before, until one morning Still woke to find a faint dusting of frost on the rooftop around her. She wrapped her violin in an extra layer of newspaper, hid it in its usual place, and climbed down the drainpipe. She walked the long way around to the market, just so that she could see how it made the city look. *I’ll need to get a coat*, she thought. It was her first thought about the future in a long, long time.

She played twice that afternoon, but only a few puppets went past, and only one tossed a gumdrop into her box. The frost was gone by the time the sun set, but a few early flakes of snow fluttered in the air as she trudged back to her rooftop. She climbed the drainpipe (it seemed as natural now as walking up a flight of stairs), dropped her newspapers, and reached in under the eaves behind the gargoyle for her violin.

It was gone.

She felt around. The violin wasn’t there. She looked around wildly, panic rising in her throat. The dent on her cheek seemed to throb. Where was it? What had happened to it?

Still was just about to scream or cry when a grating voice above her said, “Is this what you’re looking for?”

## *Chapter 7*

**S**till was so startled that she almost fell backward off the roof. The gargoyle had spoken!

“A couple of crows found it,” the gargoyle said. His voice sounded like two bricks being scraped against each other.

“And you know what they’re like. They weren’t quite sure what it was, but they were going to carry it off anyway. I got it away from them, but then I couldn’t reach the newspaper to wrap it up again, so I thought I’d best hold onto it.” He turned it over gently. “It’s very beautiful.”

“May I—may I have it back?” Still asked. She trembled, too afraid to feel amazed.

“Of course,” the gargoyle said. He held it out to her. Still snatched it from his hands and hugged it close.

“Is it all right?” the gargoyle asked.

Still nodded. She didn’t even have to look at it to know—she would have been able to tell the instant she touched it if it had been scratched or cracked. It was all right.

It was all right... She relaxed, just slightly. “Thank you for rescuing it,” she said. “I, um, I don’t have much, just a couple of gumdrops, but...” She trailed off as the gargoyle shook its head.

“I don’t have much use for gumdrops,” he said gently. “But I’d love to hear you play. It’s been a long time since I heard any music.”

“I don’t play it any more,” Still said. “Not really. But if you’d like to come down to the market some day, I—I sort of play there. People seem to like it.”

The gargoyle shook his head again. “I wish I could.”

“Oh, come on,” Still said bravely. Her violin was all right. She could be brave. “I think the building would be safe for one day without you here.”

The gargoyle’s voice scraped, *skrrk skrrk skrrk*. It took Still a moment to realize that he was laughing. “No,” he finally said. “I can’t come down because I *can’t*. Look!” He spread his wings and reached for the sky with both arms. Still gasped. His top half was alive, but his bottom half was part of the building!

“You see?” he asked. “That’s why I’m called a ‘guard goyle’—I’m always on guard.”

“On guard for what?”

The gargoyle shrugged. “Not much, actually. The shops around here all closed a long time ago. Now only the fog and I are left.”

Still suddenly felt sorry for the stony creature. Stuck up on the roof, year in, year out, with no-one to talk to—it must be horrible.

“But I don’t mind,” the gargoyle said, almost as if he had read her mind. “The birds bring me news of what’s happening in the world, and the wind brings me newspapers to tell me what the birds don’t know. And every winter I get to see whether icicles ever grow the same way twice. They don’t, you know. At least, they never have.”

“So they’re like snowflakes,” Still said. “Each one is different.”

The gargoyle blinked. “Really? I never knew that.”

Still laughed. “Oh, come on. Everybody knows that!”

The gargoyle shook his head solemnly. “Not me.” He held out his hand for a moment, then brought it close to his eyes. “So you’re one of a kind, are you?” he asked lightly.

Still laughed, thinking he was joking, but then he blew gently on his palm. A single white flake danced away into the night.

She watched it lose itself in the darkness. “I should go,” she said. “I need to find somewhere to sleep tonight.”

“I don’t mind you sleeping here,” the gargoyle replied. When Still didn’t answer, he continued, “You’d be safer than you would most places.”

“Are you sure?” Still asked.

The gargoyle nodded, smiling a little shyly. “Yes, I’m sure. It’s nice having something worthwhile to guard again after all these years.”

Still slept with her violin in her arms that night, as she did every night. The gargoyle watched over her, as he had every night since she first climbed onto the roof. The moon rose and set. A handful of stars twinkled through the ever-present fog until morning came again.

Still took her violin to the market that morning. “I need to find a blanket to wrap it in,” she told the gargoyle brightly. “In case it snows again.” She couldn’t meet the gargoyle’s eyes as she spoke. All he said was, “Keep it safe.”

“Oh, so you do still have it,” Attic exclaimed when she arrived at his stall.

“Yes, I do. I need to find a blanket for it.” Still leaned over his counter to fish out the book she had started reading the previous morning.

“A blanket? Well, the best place would probably be—Look out!”

Attic grabbed her arm and pulled her halfway up onto the counter. Still yelped, twisting so that she wouldn’t crush her violin. Hard rubber wheels screeched behind her. A familiar voice said, “No problem. No problem. Easy stop.”

Still shook off Attic’s arm and turned around. It was Crest-of-the-Wave, of course, in his green-and-gold uniform, with a matching scarf wrapped around his neck. He twirled on his skates, so that the ends of the scarf lifted up like the wings of a gaudy bird.

“How about being a little more careful?” Attic demanded angrily. “It’s getting icy—you could slip and really hurt someone.”

Crest-of-the-Wave just spun around again, then fished three dark twists of licorice out of his pocket and held them up triumphantly.

“Wow,” Still said. “Big job?”

Crest-of-the-Wave nodded vigorously. “Biggest. Cargo balloon crashed last night. Everything lost. Oil, songs, boots, everything. Had to tell the shipper. Bankrupt, probably.”

“I guess your lucky face paint came through again.” Still pointed. “You still have some on your cheek.”

“Whoops.” Crest-of-the-Wave wiped it away with the end of his scarf.

“Balloon crash... Do you mean the *Wandersome*?” Attic asked from behind Still.

“Very same.” Crest-of-the-Wave winked at Still. “Smart, he is. You coming to watch us skate this afternoon? Learned a new trick. Like this, step step slide, and around, and—”

“Well, that’s surprising. Have you seen this morning’s papers yet?” Attic interrupted loudly. He tapped Still on the shoulder and handed her a freshly-baked newspaper. “Right there,” he said, pointing to a small box at the bottom of the page.

“Correction,” Still read aloud. “We reported yesterday that the *Wandersome*, en route hither with full cargo, had been lost. She had in fact only sustained some minor damage setting down for repairs. We regret any inconvenience or distress our error may have caused...” Still trailed off. She looked up at Crest-of-the-Wave.

The roller-skating puppet didn’t seem bothered by the news at all. “Must have been some other balloon,” he said brightly. “Or they sent me before they knew.”

“Or maybe it’s just the paint talking,” Attic muttered. He dropped an armload of books onto the counter with a thud.

“Come with me next time, then.” Crest-of-the-Wave rolled a little closer to Attic’s stall. He put his elbows on the counter

and winked at Still. “Do you good. Get some fresh air. Meet some new people. Have some fun, if you want.”

“What I *want* is for you to run over someone else’s customers. Now, could you move your arms, please? I’m trying to get these sorted.” Attic dropped another armload of books onto the counter with an even louder thud. Crest-of-the-Wave straightened up, raising his hands in mock apology.

“Oh, Attic, don’t be so rude.” Still put her book down on top of the pile on the counter with a much smaller thud. “I wasn’t even really in his way.”

“No problem, no problem.” Crest-of-the-Wave wrapped his scarf around his neck. “Want to go practice that new trick anyway. Where there’s lots of space, so I don’t run anyone over. See you this afternoon.” He did a quick double spin and shot off like a brightly colored bird.

“Good riddance,” Attic muttered, glaring.

Still punched him in the shoulder, just a little too hard to be playful. “That was really rude. He wouldn’t have run me over. Why do you have to be such a dull pair of scissors, anyway?”

“Maybe I just need to meet some new people,” he replied sourly. “Or get some fresh air.”

“Well, maybe you do.” All of a sudden Still felt restless and fed up. “Anyway, I’m going to go and look for a blanket. I’ll see you tomorrow.” She tucked her violin under her arm and turned to go.

“Have fun roller skating,” Attic said to her back.

“I will,” she said over her shoulder.

Still looked in five stalls before finding a red flannel blanket that felt soft enough. She asked the stall keeper to hold onto it, just for a day or two, so that she could get enough candy together to buy it. “Here, take it,” he said. “Give me what you’ve got when you’ve got it.”

Still felt a catch in her throat. The market vendors only gave credit to their own. She thanked him, then wrapped her violin up carefully and went off to perform.



The market was busy despite the cold. She set her red-wrapped violin down carefully on the cobblestones at her feet with a little folded paper box in front of it. She raised her arms, closed her eyes, and waited for silence to blow through her like wind through leaves. She played slowly, thoughtfully, thinking about Attic and Crest-of-the-Wave. She liked them both a lot, but she didn't want to become tangled up in anyone else's strings...

She was so wrapped up in her playing that didn't even hear the noon bell ring. When she opened her eyes, there was enough candy in her box to pay for the blanket, and dinner, and dinner the next day, too. It was the most candy she had ever earned in a single day.

The stall keeper was surprised to see her back so soon, and even more surprised when she gave him one more gumdrop than they had agreed. He told her she could be his customer any time she wanted. She laughed, then walked through the market to the fountain where the roller skaters gathered.

Crest-of-the-Wave was sitting on the lip of the fountain. "What's the matter?" Still asked. "I thought you had a new trick to practice."

Crest-of-the-Wave nodded. "Tired. Takes the gears right out of you sometimes."

Still nodded sympathetically. He did look tired, just as he always did after a successful job. "I'm sorry about Attic. I don't know why he was being so rude."

Crest-of-the-Wave looked straight at her. "No?"

Still shifted uncomfortably and looked away. "No, I don't."

"Oh." Crest-of-the-Wave shrugged. "Guess I don't either then."

They sat in silence for a few moments, watching the roller skaters do their tricks. Crest-of-the-Wave eventually stirred. "See you tomorrow?"

"Where are you going?" Still asked.

Crest-of-the-Wave shrugged. "Sleep. Busy night tomorrow. Need to be rested."

"More bad news to deliver?"

Crest-of-the-Wave shook his head. "Nope. Twins and I are going shopping. Need some new clothes."

"Oh." Still didn't think much of the twins. Sometimes they changed their faces twice or three times a day. They made Crest-of-the-Wave look like—well, like Attic. "Where are you going shopping?"

Crest-of-the-Wave stood, wagging his head from side to side to get a kink out. "It's a secret. You can come with us, if you want."

Still fingered the gumdrops in her pocket. "I don't really have enough candy for clothes."

Crest-of-the-Wave rolled his eyes. "Won't need it. Anyway, see you tomorrow." He skated away without saying goodbye.

The gray sky was somehow even grayer after Crest-of-the-Wave left. Still let her feet carry her back to her usual sleeping place. She had just crossed the bridge over the canal when she heard wheels squeaking in the fog on her left. She knew that sound—it was the faceless old mumbler's baby carriage. She hurried along, frightened by the thought of his blank features, and by the possibility that he might be bringing her another paper boat.

When she reached the drainpipe, she tied the corners of the blanket together to make a little sack. Slinging it around her neck, she climbed hand over hand to the roof. "Hello," she said brightly to the gargoyle.

"Hello," he replied. "I wasn't sure you would come back."

"Of course I was going to." She undid the knot that held the blanket around her neck and held it up. "I found a blanket. See? That ought to do, don't you think?"

"It looks just right to me," the gargoyle agreed.

Just then they heard rusty wheels go *squeak squeak* down below. "Oh, he gives me the shivers," Still said.

“You mean Nickel?” The gargoyle shook his head. “It’s sad. He used to grow balloons, years ago. Had a greenhouse full of them, all shapes and colors.”

Still rewrapped her violin. “What happened?”

The gargoyle sighed. “He had a friend, another balloon grower named Pencil. She wanted to get him something special for his birthday, so she went down into the old sewer tunnels under the city to see if she could find him a transparent balloon.”

“A *transparent* balloon? I didn’t know there was such a thing.”

The gargoyle nodded. “They’re very rare. They only grow underground, where there’s never any light. But she didn’t find her balloon. Something else found her instead.”

“Glass rats,” Still whispered. Glass rats, with little voices going *tee hee, tee hee*.

The gargoyle nodded again. “All that was left was a few pieces of gnawed clockwork. Nickel, well, it was just too much for him. The next day, he painted a great big smile on his face. When that didn’t make him feel any better, he had another one done, even bigger. Pretty soon he was getting a new face done every single day, and then...”

“And then?”

The gargoyle rustled his stony wings. “And then he bought a chisel and tried *carving* himself a smile. When even *that* didn’t work, he sanded it off and tried again. And again, and again.” The gargoyle shrugged. “By the time he was done, there was so little left of him that even *he* didn’t know who he was.”

Oily tears welled up in Still’s eyes. “That’s so sad,” she whispered.

The gargoyle nodded. “Yes, it is.”

Still looked up. Were there more stars out tonight than usual? Or was the fog just a little thinner? She stretched out at

the gargoyle's feet with her violin in her arms. "Good night," she said softly.

"Good night," he replied, but she was already asleep.

## Chapter 8

**T**he next morning, Still went to Attic's as usual. Neither spoke of what had happened the day before. She picked out a book, then leaned up against his counter and flipped through it slowly. They didn't talk much, even though it was a slow day for business.

It was a slow day by the fountain, too, as slow as the previous day had been busy. Most of the puppets walking by were regulars, who ignored her or nodded at her depending on their mood and manners. The few shoppers who had braved the cold were there for specific things, like embroidered bootlaces or a snow clock for their winter garden. They hurried past Still with their heads down and their scarves wrapped tightly around their necks.

She gave up as the mid-afternoon bell went *deng, dong, boong*. After buying her usual cup of oil from Kettle, she had just two worn gumdrops left in her pocket. *That's hardly enough for breakfast tomorrow*, she thought glumly. *Guess there'll be no new clothes for me.*

Crest-of-the-Wave wasn't at the fountain when she got there, but the twins were. They had painted themselves fierce animal faces that morning, with sharp teeth and narrow eyes, and whiskers abristle under their noses. They sauntered over when Still arrived.

"So, we hear you're—"

"—coming shopping with us." They sniffed in unison.

"You'll need a—"

"—better face than that."

"I don't think there's anything wrong with my face," Still said primly.

"Oh, well, we'll see—"

“—what Crest has to say about that.”

“Crest-of-the-Wave,” said a sharp voice. Still jumped. Crest-of-the-Wave had rolled up beside them on silent wheels. He scowled at the twins until they dropped their eyes and mumbled, “Crest-of-the-Wave.”

“Better.” He nodded at Still.

“Hello,” she said hesitantly. She stared at his newest face. *He must have painted it last night*, she thought uneasily, remembering what the gargoyle had said about Nickel. It wasn’t as garish as the twins’ faces. Instead, he had added shadows on his cheeks and under his eyes, and narrowed his mouth, so that he looked like a wilder, wilier version of himself.

Crest-of-the-Wave nodded at her. “Have a couple of errands to run. See you back here tonight.” It was an order, not a question.

“Tonight?” Still shook her head. “I thought we were going shopping.”

The twins smirked. If there’d been a rock handy, Still would have thrown it at them. “Of course,” Crest-of-the-Wave said. “Tonight. To-night. Here.” He skated away, his freshly oiled wheels making no more noise than a python slithering through tall grass.

The twins looked at Still sourly. “See you—”

“—tonight,” they said sarcastically.

Still stood up. “I guess so.” She walked back through the market with her hands in her pockets and her head down. All the stalls in the market closed up at nightfall. The brooms even came through to check. And the big department stores in the city—

Her mind ducked that thought as easily and as automatically as a soldier ducking a snowball. The Still who mimed in the market on the foggy side of town didn’t know anything about department stores. How could she? *She* had never been in one. That was some other Still, from before—

Her mind ducked again. She shook her head. What had she been thinking? Something about tonight? Oh yes, she was supposed to meet Crest-of-the-Wave to go shopping. And the twins, too, with their wild faces. She shook her head. They were trouble, those two. You didn't need a spyglass to see that.

She was so engrossed in cataloguing the twins' faults that she stumbled on a loose paving stone as she was crossing the canal. She glanced down at the water as she caught herself on its low stone wall. A little paper boat was just drifting into the bridge's shadow. The light dusting of snow on its sail made it look like a tiny triangular mountain peak. "No..." she moaned wearily. She pulled her eyes away and walked as quickly as she could the rest of the way home.

"I'm sorry I'm back early," she said to the gargoyle as she pulled herself up onto the roof.

He handed her violin to her. "Why?"

"Oh, there's hardly anybody in the market today, and Crest-of-the-Wave had some errands to run." She unfolded the blanket and ran her hand down the curve of the violin. The ticking in her chest slowed slightly. The dread slowly lifted from her shoulders.

"No, I mean why are you sorry?" The gargoyle shifted slightly, his wings rustling. "I like having company." He cleared his throat. "Did I ever tell you the story of the statue they wanted to put up after Key left the city?"

Still settled herself under the eaves. "No, I don't think so."

"Well, after all the crying and panic was over, and they had elected a new mayor, someone thought it would be a good idea to put up a statue. Everybody liked the idea, of course, but then they discovered that no-one could agree on what Key looked like."

"What do you mean?" Still shook her head. "Everybody knows what she looks like. There must be a dozen pictures of her in— in—" She almost said "my school," but her mind veered away. "In the books I've been reading."

“Ah, but those all came afterward. A lot of people drew what they remembered, but all the pictures were different. They eventually chose one, but that was just because the mayor’s husband had drawn it.”

“Oh, you’re making that up... Aren’t you?”

The gargoyle shook his head solemnly. “They never did build that statue. And now, there’s no-one left who actually saw her with their own eyes, so I guess we’ll never know.”

“Or maybe she didn’t really leave.” Still rested her elbows on her knees. “Some of the books say that she’s still here. She got tired of being a hero, and having to solve everybody’s problems, and just wanted to be herself again.” She laughed. “Maybe she works in the market. She could be anyone!”

“A window cleaner,” the gargoyle suggested.

“A tin smith.”

“A bicycle repair man.”

“The balloon seller—or his parrot!”

“A lamplighter.”

“A what?” Still asked.

“A lamplighter,” the gargoyle repeated. “One of the puppets who light the streetlamps at night, and then douse the candles in the morning.”

“Oh, you’re making that up,” Still scolded. “There aren’t any candles in streetlights.”

“Oh.” The gargoyle’s wings rustled. “Well, there used to be. Do they use oil now instead? That seems an awful waste.”

“No, silly, they’re electric.” How could the gargoyle not know that? How old *was* he? “Well, I’d better be going. Crest-of-the-Wave is taking me shopping tonight.” Still folded the blanket around her violin and handed it to him. “Can you...?”

“Of course,” he said. He tucked it next to his pedestal.

A few moments later Still was back on the street. Her feet went *clap, clap, clap* as she walked back to the market. She was careful not to look down at the canal as she crossed the bridge.



Crest-of-the-Wave was waiting impatiently at the dry fountain. “Hi,” Still said. “What about the twins? Did they decide not to come?”

“Already at the yard,” Crest-of-the-Wave told her. “Watching.”

“Watching what?” she asked, then took a step back as Crest-of-the-Wave took a small tray of paints out of the bag he was carrying. “Um...”

He beckoned her forward. “Only take a moment.”

“I don’t know if I should,” Still said hesitantly. The shadows painted on Crest-of-the-Wave’s face seemed to shift every time he turned his head.

“It helps with shopping,” he told her brusquely. “Now stand still.” He mushed the tip of the brush into a circle of black paint, then drew a heavy swipe over one of her eyebrows. Mush, swipe over the other eyebrow.

“Stop, stop,” she said. “Let me see what you’ve done.” She picked up the little mirror that lay on the paint tray.

The thicker eyebrows made her look older, and more knowing, but—“Eww.” She tilted it from side to side in front of her. “They don’t even match. Here, give me that.” She plucked the brush out of his hand, dabbed it in the paint, and evened up the eyebrows. There, that was better. Now, what about her mouth? She added a line on each side, right at the corner... Good. And a beauty spot, of course. Right cheek or left? Left, she decided with a giggle. And maybe sharpen her nose, just a bit.

Then she hesitated. What about the scar on her face? She hardly thought about it any more, but there it was. She could paint over it, or highlight it, or—no, she would just leave it alone.

“There,” she said. “All done. How do I look?”

“Ready,” Crest-of-the-Wave growled. He tossed the mirror, the brush, and the paint tray back into his bag. “Come on.”

Still practically danced along beside him. She felt wonderfully light on her feet. The wicked little grin she had given herself felt just right for tonight. *Right for tonight*, she repeated, pleased with the rhyme. *I'm such a sight, I'm right for tonight*.

Still followed Crest-of-the-Wave through one back alley after another. A shortcut here, a hop over a fence there... soon she was completely turned around. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"Not far." Crest-of-the-Wave suddenly flattened himself against a wall. Still pressed herself against the brick beside him.

"What's—"

"Sst!" he hissed. She scowled. *Don't shush me*, she thought. Then she heard footsteps, and voices.

Two puppets in police uniforms strolled past the mouth of the alley that she and Crest-of-the-Wave were hiding in. Still closed her eyes. *Don't look, don't look, nothing to see*, she pleaded. Sure enough, the two brooms swept by on their rounds.

"Fifteen, sixteen..." Crest-of-the-Wave counted all the way to one hundred under his breath before peeking around the corner. He beckoned Still to follow him again.

They cut across the main street into another alley, hopped over a fence, squeezed between two buildings, and came out near the canal. Still slowed, afraid of what might be waiting for her there, but no little paper boats bobbed up and down on the dark water. She shook her head. Why should she be afraid? Those little paper boats were looking for Still—they'd never recognize *her*, not with her cunning little smile and knowing eyes.

The twins were waiting in the shadows beside a stolid rectangular warehouse. "We were hoping—"

"—you'd change your mind," they whispered to Crest-of-the-Wave. Still glared at them. They smirked back.

Crest-of-the-Wave pointed his thumb at the warehouse. “All clear?”

The twins nodded. “Next set of brooms won’t be by—”

“—for at least an hour. Everything is—”

“—upstairs.”

Still grabbed Crest-of-the-Wave’s arm. “Wait a second,” she hissed. “What’s going on? This isn’t a store. I thought we were going shopping?”

The twins smirked again. “We don’t shop—”

“—in stores. It’s too—”

“—crowded. Besides, you get better deals if you go—”

“—straight to the warehouse.” They hitched their thumbs over their shoulders to point at the building behind them.

“You mean you’re going to break in?” Still gasped. Then she giggled. “Really?”

“Really,” Crest-of-the-Wave nodded, shaking off her arm.

“But what about—what about the police? Or gargoyles?”

The twins rolled their eyes. “There’s no such thing—”

“—as gargoyles. That’s just a story—”

“—to frighten children.”

“Less talk, more action,” Crest-of-the-Wave said brusquely. The twins saluted, still smirking.

Still felt giddy. They were going to rob the warehouse! And *she* was going to rob it with them!

The four puppets hurried to the rear of the building. A second one stood there, separated from the first by a narrow alley. Its windows had been smashed, and part of one wall had fallen away in some long-forgotten earthquake. Still followed the others inside and up six flights of stinking, slippery stairs.

There *was* a gargoyle on the roof after all, or what was left of one. She circled it cautiously. Its head was gone, and its wings had been worn away to stubs. She touched its shoulder sadly, wondering if it had known her gargoyle, or had ever watched over a sleeping puppet.

The twins broke her daydream. “Hey, would you mind—”

“—being useful over here?” They were wrestling a heavy plank up onto a crate to make a ramp. Beside them, Crest-of-the-Wave was knotting a length of twine around his waist.

“Leave her be,” he told the twins curtly. He beckoned Still over. “Finger here.”

Still held the knot in place while Crest-of-the-Wave made another. “Don’t know why—”

“—you even brought her. It’s not like—”

“—she’s being useful,” the twins grumbled.

“She wanted to go shopping,” Crest-of-the-Wave said in a tone that didn’t encourage any more questions. He gave Still a steady look. “Right?”

“Absolutely,” she purred. She *loved* how her new face made her feel. “When do we start?”

Crest-of-the-Wave glanced at the plank. “Ready?”

The twins gave it one last shove to line it up, then nodded in unison. Crest-of-the-Wave handed Still the coiled end of the twine that was tied around his waist. “Just let it run,” he told her. He skated to the other end of the roof before she could ask any questions.

Crest-of-the-Wave set himself in a starter’s crouch, feet braced and fingertips resting on the roof. He tensed like a lion getting ready to pounce, then shot forward. *Swoosh, swoosh, swoosh* went his skates, his springs and cables straining. He hit the plank in a crouch and launched himself into the air.

Still gasped. The twine flew off the coil in Crest-of-the-Wave’s wake. For a long moment he seemed to hang in the air between the two buildings, then *thump!* He came down on the roof of the warehouse. He braked hard and fell forward with a muffled *ooph!*

Still rushed to the edge of the roof. “Are you all right?” she hissed as he picked himself up.

The twins pulled her back. “Shh! No noise. Never know—”

“—who’s listening. Now, give us—”

“—that.” They took the twine and knotted it to one end of a heavier rope. One of them waved to Crest-of-the-Wave. He waved back, a little stiffly, then pulled the rope across.

Crest-of-the-Wave tied the rope to the warehouse’s chimney. Still and the twins slithered across one at a time. As she dangled above the alley, Still wondered how often Crest-of-the-Wave had done this. She didn’t ask, though. Even with her face painted, she didn’t really want to know.

A minute and a crowbar later, they were inside the warehouse. Giggles welled up in Still’s throat. They were really going to do it! They were really going to—no, *she* was really going to rob the warehouse!

“Take whatever you want,” Crest-of-the-Wave whispered in her ear. She nodded. He smelled of fresh paint, and polish, and hot oil from his skating. She wondered what she smelled like, and whether it made his head feel spinny.

Shelves lined the walls. More shelves stood in the middle of the floor, with jackets, boots, hats, scarves, mittens, kilts, gloves, and more gloves piled on them neatly. Crest-of-the-Wave and the twins wandered among them, picking things up and tossing them away like princesses trying to decide what to wear to an afternoon tea party. Still really did giggle then, just once, and followed suit.

*I’ve never shopped by moonlight before*, Still thought. It wasn’t strong enough to let her see colors clearly, but she could tell by touch which fabrics were cheap and scratchy, and which were rich and warm. She hummed a little waltz as she picked out a double armload of winter wardrobe for herself. *And a hat to say thank you to Crest-of-the-Wave*, she thought. *And a new waistcoat for Attic*. She hesitated, then pouted and put it back. He was so boring—he’d probably never wear it anyway.

Crest-of-the-Wave and the twins filled the small sacks they had brought with them with small, rich items: gloves with pearl beads, embroidered silk scarves, silver belt buckles, and

fleece-lined underwear. “Out,” Crest-of-the-Wave ordered as soon as his bag was full. The twins scooted toward the door.

“You too,” Crest-of-the-Wave told Still. “That’s enough for tonight.” She pouted, but didn’t protest when he took her arm and turned her in the right direction.

The front door was locked. “Can’t see—”

“—any brooms,” the twins whispered.

Crest-of-the-Wave nodded. “You go first. See you at Swim’s.”

The lock clicked. The twins pushed the door open. Still winced as it squeaked. Crest-of-the-Wave took her arm again. “Stay with me.”

“All right.” Still dumped her takings onto a thin blanket she had picked up as an afterthought, then tied its corners to make a bundle. She hugged it to her chest, barely able to stop herself from jumping up and down with glee.

“Go.” The twins slipped out onto the street. Crest-of-the-Wave followed them, with Still right on his heels.

*Phweeeet!* The police whistle cut the silence like scissors cutting paper. “You there!” a harsh voice shouted from the canal. “What are you doing?”

“Go!” Crest-of-the-Wave barked. The twins were already going. The policeman blew his whistle again.

Crest-of-the-Wave shot past Still. “Wait!” she cried. “Wait for me!” He disappeared into the alley beside the warehouse. She ran after him, but by the time she reached the derelict building behind the warehouse, he was gone.

Panic welled up in Still like a cold geyser. *Phweet! Phweet!* She heard more police whistles behind her. And shouting—those were the twins’ voices!

“Oh, now what?” she whispered frantically. She suddenly remembered the bundle in her arms. She threw it into the derelict building. Were there any newspapers around? Yes, over there, a few. She picked them up and ran to the other end of the alley. All she needed was a doorway...

A heavy boot nudged her side a minute later. “Wake up,” a hard voice said. She opened bleary eyes and looked up at two scowling policemen.

“Go ’way,” she mumbled. “Tryna sleep.” Newspapers rustled as she turned over.

The boot nudged her again, not as gently. “Hey,” the policeman said again. “Let me take a look at you.”

Still shook her head, then yelped as a strong hand grabbed her arm and turned her over. “Leggo,” she mumbled.

“Naw, it’s not her,” the other policeman said. “Look at her feet. The guy we’re after was on skates.”

The first policeman let go of her arm. “Ought to take her in anyway,” he growled. “She could warp out here in this cold.”

“She’d just be back tomorrow,” his partner said. “Come on. Maybe he went down to the docks.”

Still listened as they walked away. All of a sudden she was crying. And it was cold—how could she not have noticed how cold it was?

She waited until her tears stopped, then pulled herself to her feet. Which way was home? She shook her head to clear it.

The fog had closed in again. If the canal was there, behind her, then... She stumbled down the street.

It turned out that she was only a dozen blocks away from the market. She almost started crying again when she saw the dry fountain where the roller skaters gathered. She stayed away from the stalls in case any police were on patrol, then let her feet take their usual route across the canal.

## Chapter 9

**“Oh...” Still groaned.** It was morning. She lay curled up in a ball on the roof. Her eyes felt gritty, and even through the fog, the sun seemed far too bright.

She blinked again, rubbing her eyes. When she took her hand away from her face, it was smeared with the remains of the previous night’s paint. “Wonderful,” she muttered. She didn’t want to think about what she looked like.

Still twisted around to put her back against the wall. “Good morning,” she yawned.

The gargoyle nodded. “Good morning,” he said, staring out over the rooftops across the alley.

Still shook her head. “What a night. I’m going to need some turpentine, aren’t it?” She yawned again. “Some turpentine, and a nice, hot cup of oil, and then maybe I’ll just sleep for the rest of the day.”

“You may need more than turpentine,” the gargoyle said, still not looking at her. He held out a small blanket-wrapped bundle. “Here.”

Still’s clockwork skipped a tick. “What—what’s wrong?” She jerked to her feet and snatched her violin away from the gargoyle. Her hands trembled as she unwrapped it.

A hand-sized patch of varnish on the top of the violin had yellowed. Still knew without touching it that it would feel coarse and brittle, like paper that had been soaked and dried. “What happened?” she whispered. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything,” the gargoyle replied calmly. “When you didn’t come back last night, I started wondering if you had left. But I knew you wouldn’t go without your violin, so I undid the blanket to see whether you had put a brick in its place.” He turned his head slowly. His eyes were as dark as



ever, but hard instead of sad. “I would have told you last night, but I hardly recognized you when you came up the drainpipe.”

Still brushed her hand over the belly of her violin. The varnish was still clear amber there, not flaky yellow. “I have to get this fixed.” Her voice was calm, even though each tick of her clockwork felt like it might be her last. “I can’t leave it like this. There must be somebody in the market who does varnishing.”

“Well, if I were you, I’d clean up a bit before I went. That is, if I could go.” He glanced up through the fog. “And I’d hurry. It’s going to rain.”

Still nodded. She could feel it too. The previous day’s snow was gone, but the air felt damp and heavy. “Warping weather,” people called it, the kind that made old puppets’ joints swell up.

She knotted the corners of the blanket together and slung the makeshift sack over her shoulder. She could wash her face in the canal, then use the blanket to dry herself.

The drainpipe was wet enough to be slippery. Still wondered how she had climbed it the night before. Stupid, stupid, stupid... What had she been thinking?

Then she hesitated. Feeling awkward, she scrambled back up the drainpipe and poked her head above the edge of the roof. “Hey,” she said. “Um, thanks. For looking after it, I mean.”

“You’re welcome,” the gargoyle replied.

Still hesitated again. “I wouldn’t just leave, you know.”

The gargoyle nodded. “I know. But sometimes things happen, and people don’t always have a chance to say goodbye. Now, you’d better get going.”

Still slid down the drainpipe. The cobblestones were already slick under her feet. They would turn icy overnight. She felt a sudden pang of regret for the bundle of clothes she had thrown away. She would need them soon.

That made her think of Crest-of-the-Wave, and the twins. Had they escaped? Or had the police caught them? Would they tell the police about her? *The twins might*, she thought, *But not Crest-of-the-Wave*. At least, she hoped he wouldn't...

Narrow stone steps ran down to the canal from the street beside the bridge. Still climbed over the rusty gate in front of them, more worried about scratching her violin in its blanket than herself. She picked her way down to the water, then knelt and looked down.

She gasped at the face looking back at her. "Oh no..." she whispered. The paint had run and smeared during the night. Her sly grin had turned bitter and cynical. And the little lines at the corners of her eyes didn't seem knowing any more, just worn.

She splashed handfuls of water on her face. It was bitterly cold. She scrubbed and scrubbed, ignoring the icy trickles that ran down her neck and under her collar. Suddenly she snorted. It was as bad as going camping. No, it was actually *worse*, because at least she got a hot breakfast when she was camping. She could pull her clothes on while she was still in her sleeping bag, then wriggle out, and—

"No!" She scrambled to her feet, snatching up her violin. "Get away from me!" A small paper boat bobbed up and down in the water just an arm's length from her. She grabbed a loose piece of stone.

"Get *away* from me!" she shouted. She threw the stone as hard as she could. *Splash!* The little boat disappeared without a trace.

Still shivered, hugging her violin to her chest. What had she been doing? Her face—that was right, she was cleaning her face. She buried it in the blanket, too weary to cry, and towed it as hard as she dared. When she pulled the blanket away, it was muddy with smears of paint.

"Key's knees, what happened to you?" Attic exclaimed a few minutes later. Still almost laughed—it was the feeblest

attempt at swearing she had heard since she first came to the market.

She set her precious bundle down on the counter of his stall. "I'm all right. Really. I'll get the rest off later. But oh, Attic, look." She unwrapped the blanket. "Look what happened."

Attic glanced at the discolored patch of varnish on the violin, then back at Still's face. She lowered her eyes, ashamed. "Are you really all right?" he asked.

Still nodded. She could feel hot tears trying to leak out of her eyes, but she blinked them back. "I just—do you know anyone who could fix it?"

Attic hesitated. "I might. Hang on a tick-tock." He hastily closed the shutters on his stall. "Follow me."

Attic led her to a small shop three blocks from the market. The faded sign above its grimy window told uncaring passers-by that Hurdle & Co. were open for business. Attic held the door open for her, then followed her in.

"Hello?" Attic said. "Grumps, are you here?"

Still looked around the gloomy room. The shelves were bare, unless dust counted. Half of the numbers had fallen off the face of the clock on the far wall. A ghostly odor of smoke and turpentine hung in the air.

"Grumps?" Attic repeated. "Grumps, I have a customer for you."

*Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump.* Still jumped, startled. The pounding had come from beneath her feet.

Attic bent over to lift the trap door in the floor just as it opened. It banged against his forehead. "Ow," he exclaimed.

"Heh? What? Watch yourself." An elderly puppet with deep wrinkles etched in his face stumped up the narrow stairs with a large black tin cradled in his arms. He kicked the trap door closed with another bang.

"Splintering things get heavier every year," he grunted, picking up his tin. "Ought to rig a pulley, save my legs."

"I'm fine, thank you," Attic said to the old puppet's back, rubbing his forehead. "It's just a scratch. How are you?"

The old puppet set the black tin down on the long, narrow workbench that stood against the far wall. "Of course, pulley would need a hook up there." He jerked a thumb up at the ceiling without looking. "Need a ladder to get it in, and where am I going to find a ladder? Or a hook, for that matter, or a pulley. Or rope." He picked up a screwdriver and started chipping at the congealed goo around the tin's lid. "Sad day, isn't it, when an honest craftsman can't afford a piece of rope to save his old legs."

"Grumps... Grumps! Did you hear what I said? I brought you a customer."

*Chip, chip, chip.* "I heard you."

Attic sighed. "I'm sorry," he said to Still. "I shouldn't have brought you here. There's another place I know, up by the bootmaker's. Maybe they'll—"

"Oh no you don't." The old puppet put down his screwdriver and turned around to glare at Attic. "They're thieves, they are. Wouldn't send a glass rat to them, not even one I didn't like."

Attic sighed again. He waved a hand at the old puppet. "Still, I'd like you to meet my grandfather, Hurdle. Grumps, this is Still. She needs your help."

The old puppet finally looked straight at Still. "Morning," he muttered, searching her face. Still lowered her eyes, ashamed of the dabs of paint still smeared on her forehead and cheeks.

"No, no, none of that." Hurdle stepped forward and took her chin in one strong hand. He tilted her head back to study the paint smears.

"Hmph." He let go of her chin and glared at Attic. "Nothing to do with me, that kind of thing. So what are you really here for?"

Still unwrapped her violin wordlessly. “Hmm...” He reached out to take it. Still snatched it back.

“Easy, easy,” Hurdle said, raising his hands in the gesture she had seen Attic use so often. “I won’t hurt it. Or play it, either. Bit too old for making music anyway.” He put out his hand. Still hesitated a moment longer, then thrust the violin at him.

Hurdle took it over to the window. “Hmm...” He held it up, letting the murky light that had fought its way through the grime on the window play over it. “When did this happen?”

“Last night.” Still swallowed. “I don’t know exactly when.”

Hurdle glanced at her, then raised an eyebrow at Attic.

“What? No!” Attic exclaimed, scandalized. “I didn’t—I wouldn’t—”

“Didn’t think so,” Hurdle grunted. “Not with your nose stuck in those splintering books of yours all day.” He clucked. “Bit of a mess, this. Just the one patch, but these top two layers, they’re number eight silk, maybe even number ten. Scrape away the damage, put on a fresh coat or two, it’d never look right. Start flaking, too, if it got damp.”

Still sagged. “You mean you can’t help?”

Hurdle snorted. “Course I can help. Only an idiot would try to re-varnish this. Fellow up by the bootmaker’s, for example. No, this just wants a good earth pack overnight. Put some soil on it, wrap it up tight, leave it sit. Varnish will be as good as new by tomorrow.”

Attic crossed his arms. “And how much will earthing it cost?”

Hurdle shrugged. “Twenty sweet. Twenty-five, maybe, if you want it cleaned up after.”

“Twenty?” he yelped, scandalized. “That’s more candy than you’ve seen for one job in your life, you old fraud. Fifteen, with the cleaning. And you know that’s a fair price.”

It was Hurdle’s turn to cross his arms. “How would you know? Hm? Didn’t remember enough of the trade to know it’d

want an earth pack, did you? Probably didn't even recognize the varnish was silk, either. Splintering books of yours..."

Attic glared at his grandfather. "I will *not* let her give you that much candy for a simple job like this. It's indecent, it's unfair, and I—"

"Attic, Attic, it's all right. It's all right. I can pay." Still twisted her blanket in her hands. "Not all at once, maybe, but if I skip breakfast for the next couple of weeks, I can save it up."

Attic looked at her blankly. "What kind of breakfasts are you eating?"

"Just oil, from Kettle's. Or Wing's, some days. It's two gumdrops a cup, so if I only get a half-cup, that's... All right, three weeks. Would three weeks be all right?" she asked Hurdle pleadingly.

Grandfather and grandson exchanged glances. "Still," Attic said gently. "He means twenty licorice, not twenty gumdrops."

Still's clockwork stopped. "Oh." *I'd have to go without breakfast forever*, she thought dizzily.

It might have been the look on her face, or the catch in her voice. Or maybe it was just another move in the never-ending chess game of wills between Hurdle and his grandson. "All right, fifteen," Hurdle grumbled. "Including a cleaning. But that's fifteen licorice, not fifteen gumdrops, and I'll have candy in hand, understood?"

"Grumps, she doesn't have fifteen licorice. You heard her—she doesn't even have fifteen gumdrops, not without a month of skipping breakfast. Just once, just this once, can you give someone a ride-on?"

"Gave you one," the old puppet said sourly. "Look what happened. Buying and selling other people's cast-offs, instead of working an honest trade."

Attic threw up his hands. "I give up. I thought maybe this time... Never mind. Come on. We'll try the shop by the bootmaker's."

“No, wait.” Still twisted the blanket around and around in her hands. “Are you sure you can fix it?” she asked Hurdle. “Fix it like new, I mean?”

Hurdle nodded curtly. “Except for the scratch. That’d be it’s own job. Not sure how much I could do about that anyway.”

Still took a deep breath. “Then please, go ahead. I’ll have the candy for you tomorrow.”

“What? How?” Attic exclaimed. “Still, you could play on the steps of City Hall, on Key’s Day, and you wouldn’t make half that.”

“I’ll have it tomorrow,” she repeated firmly. “All of it. I’ve got some stuff I can sell.” She handed Hurdle the paint-stained blanket. He took it wordlessly, and folded it around the violin as snugly as she ever had.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Attic said to her a few moments later, out on the street. “I mean, fifteen licorice—that’s a *lot* of candy. You’re not going to sell a leg or something, are you?”

“No.” Still sighed. “But if someone offered me some turpentine and a hot cup of oil, I might.”

“Do you have any candy at all?” he asked. Still shook her head. Attic fished some gumdrops out of his pocket.

“Here,” he said, handing them to her. “No, take it, please. The brooms will sweep you for sure if you try to play looking like that.”

“Attic, I can’t. I can’t.” She shook her head. “You’ve already done so much for me.”

“What, you mean Grumps?” Attic snorted. “Don’t know how much of a favor that was. The old miser...”

They walked along in silence for a few moments. “So how come you wound up selling books?” she finally asked.

Attic sighed. “I didn’t ‘wind up’ doing anything. I started reading after my parents—after the fire, I mean. I loved it.” He shrugged and pushed his glasses up his nose with one finger. “I still do. Every book is a whole world of its own, did you know

that? I used to think that everything anyone had ever known was in a book somewhere, if only I could find it. And anything can happen in books. People can say whatever they want, do whatever they want... It just seemed like a better life than being bent over a dusty old bench with fumes in your nose every day.”

They stopped at the edge of the market. “Well, I’d better get cleaned up,” Still said awkwardly. “Thank you, very much.”

Attic looked at her doubtfully. “You’re not going to do anything foolish, are you?”

“I wasn’t planning to,” Still lied brightly. The bundle of clothes she had thrown away the night before must be worth at least fifteen licorice—maybe even the twenty that Hurdle had originally asked for. She was sure Crest-of-the-Wave would know where to sell them, if he wasn’t already in jail. They just *had* to still be there...

“Anyway, I really should get cleaned up. Thanks again.” Still punched Attic gently on the arm, then turned and hurried away.



## Chapter 10

**S**till stole a small scrap of cloth from the throw-away pile behind a hat mender's stall, then walked around to the front and asked to borrow a mirror. The hat mender frowned at her skeptically. "I'll bring it right back," Still promised. "Please?" He shrugged and bent over his stitching again.

"Right back" turned out to be two hours. That was how long it took Still to get the last smudges of paint off. By the time she was done, her face itched, and her head was throbbing. She really, really didn't feel like standing in the cold pretending to play, but her gears were desperate for oil. She handed the mirror back to the hat mender with her sweetest "thank you", then walked through the market to her usual spot.

Fold, fold, crease... fold, fold, crease... There. She set the little paper box down on the pavement, stretched, and shook her head in a vain attempt to clear it. She raised her arms just a bit too high, then relaxed and let them settle into position. Left arm slightly crooked, right arm bent at the elbow across her body... Slowly, softly, almost unable to contain the loss welling up inside her, she began to play.

But something wasn't right. She couldn't hear the silence. Judging from the way the puppets hurried past her, no-one else could either. She kept it up a few moments longer, then let her arms fall to her sides. It just wasn't right. She picked up her little paper box and scrunched it into a ball. Her head *really* hurt now.

"No free ride," Wing said firmly a few minutes later.

"I know, I know. But I promise I'll pay you tomorrow. Please?" Still felt queasy with hunger and shame.

Wing glared at her, arms crossed, then looked down at his forearm. “What you think?” he asked the dragon etched there. The little carving seemed to nod.

“All right then, one cup.” Wing poured the bubbling oil into a waxed paper cup and handed it over. “You drink slowly.”

Still nodded gratefully, but his warning was too late. She had already burned her lips.

It rained all morning. Still huddled in a doorway, dozing, until the bells rang noon. There was no point putting it off any longer.

Finding the warehouse was easier than she had expected. It was just another tired old building by daylight, with rain-streaked bricks and grimy windows. Still was afraid there would be police on guard around it, after the robbery, but the only puppets she saw were wheeling trolleys to and fro, or leaning against lampposts drinking cold oil from dirty bottles.

She walked past the warehouse and around the block. She willed her legs to go slowly. *You’re just walking*, she told herself sternly. *You’re just another puppet on her way to somewhere.*

No-one pounced on her in the alley with a triumphant “Ah ha!” A glue-smeared net didn’t drop on her, and there were no steel traps cunningly hidden in the trash. She glanced around one more time, then pulled herself up and peeked in through the window.

Her bundle lay an arm’s length below her. She pulled herself up further and reached down. Just more than an arm’s length, then. She wriggled forward, reached down, and—

“Whoops!” she yelped. She landed head first, but the bundle broke her fall. Feeling foolish, she rolled over and stood up.

“Tee hee.” Still froze. Little feet scampered across the floor on the other side of the room. She didn’t wait to hear any more. The bundle went through the window, and Still squirmed through after it.

Two minutes later, she was walking down the street with the bundle over her shoulder. Nobody paid her any attention, but every step felt heavy. *You're a thief*, a little voice in her head said insistently. *You stole these*.

"But I have to," she said aloud. "I have to get my violin fixed." And then she had to decide whether to tell the gargoyle, and what to do about Crest-of-the-Wave, and Attic, and winter was coming, and... She trudged through the thickening fog to the market.

She had thirteen pieces of licorice by nightfall, and a pocketful of gumdrops that might together be worth another piece. Some of the stall keepers had simply shaken their heads or said, "No, and please don't ask again," when she opened up her bundle. Others had given her a look, then picked one or two pieces out of her pile and haggled down the price. Each time, Still told herself that the *next* time, she would haggle back, but each time, she was too ashamed.

The glove mender was her last stop. "Not bad, not bad," she allowed, turning one petal-covered glove this way and that. "Don't suppose you could come by a few more pairs?"

"I don't think so," Still said weakly.

"Mm." The glove mender tucked the gloves under her counter and glanced around. "Well, at least you had better luck than Crest. I hear he went home empty-handed last night."

Still's clockwork went *sproing*. "Have you seen him today?" she asked in a rush. "Is he all right?"

The glove mender's eyebrows went up and down, *click clack*. "Not as such," she said off-handedly. "Did hear he'd promised Swim some merchandise. Not a puppet you want to disappoint, is Swim. Imagine your friend will be off trying to get some candy together to make it right." She pushed half a licorice whip across the counter.

Still pocketed it and hurried away. Swim! You didn't have to be in the market for long to learn that name. His joints were rusty, and a couple of his fingers were missing, but he was as

tough and as mean as a puppet could be. Some of the roller skaters said that even the brooms were afraid of him. And some of the stories they told: “He plays with matches. And his fingers? They weren’t broken off—they *burned* off. He burned them off himself!” If Crest-of-the-Wave had promised something to Swim, and couldn’t deliver... Still shuddered. Her day was getting worse by the minute.

The evening bells rang through the fog. The stall keepers began to take down their awnings and close their shutters. Still headed for the dry fountain, hoping that Crest-of-the-Wave would be there.

He wasn’t, but another roller skater was. He was sitting on a fire hydrant, tightening his laces. “Excuse me,” Still said hesitantly. “I’m looking for Crest-of-the-Wave. Have you seen him? I mean, today?”

The roller skater glanced up at her. “Maybe,” he grunted, pulling one lace tight. “Why do you ask?”

“I—I just need to talk to him.”

The roller skater glanced up again, his laces still taut across his fingers. He looked Still up and down like a carpenter eyeing a fresh plank. “Huh. Well, I don’t think he’d want to be interrupted right now. He’s, uh, working.” He tugged his laces again, then crossed them over to start the knot.

“You don’t understand,” Still pleaded. “I have some candy for him.”

The roller skater stared at Still in disbelief. “Really?”

“Yes, really,” Still said defensively.

The roller skater shook his head. “Well, I’ll be... Always wondered why you kept hanging around.” Suddenly he laughed. “That Crest...” He scrambled to his feet. “He’s in the old bandstand. You might have to wait in line, though. I think he’s already got a couple of customers.”

“Thank you,” Still said, already hurrying away. *Customers?* she wondered. *What kind of customers? Who on earth would come to Crest-of-the-Wave to get bad news?*

The old bandstand was four blocks from the market. As Still approached it, she heard a strange sound. There it was again—something was squawking up ahead. She couldn't imagine what it was, but it sounded awful. She tiptoed the last half block and pressed herself against the side of the bandstand shell, just in time to hear a petulant voice say, "Come on, it's my turn now. It's my turn, I said!"

"Oh, don't rush me, Tablecloth, you'll spoil it." The second speaker giggled. Still heard another honk.

"Keep it down, you two. Brooms hear us, we're all in it." That was Crest-of-the-Wave. His voice was as dull as lead.

She closed her eyes for a second, afraid of what she was about to see. *I could just go back to the roof*, she thought tiredly. She shook her head. She knew she was going to look. There was no point delaying. She peeked around the edge of the bandstand.

Crest-of-the-Wave was sitting on the conductor's podium with his back to her. Two older puppets stood in front of him. Both wore expensive, downtown, bought-and-paid-for clothes. And one of them, the one on the left, was holding a battered green-and-gold saxophone.

The cup of oil Still had forced down at lunch welled up in her throat. The colors of the saxophone matched the colors in Crest-of-the-Wave's jacket perfectly. The puppet holding it squawked out a few more notes, then handed it to his friend. She held it awkwardly, suddenly unsure of what to do.

"Go on," the first puppet urged her. "It's ever so much fun."

"Just play quickly," Crest-of-the-Wave grumbled. He slipped down off the podium. "Time's almost up."

"Here," the first puppet said contemptuously. He tossed Crest-of-the-Wave a fat purple gumdrop. "Now be quiet." Crest-of-the-Wave caught the candy in mid-air, then leaned back against the podium.

"Oh, Crest," Still whispered. The puppet holding the saxophone brought it up to her lips and blew a note. *Honk*.

“Oh! It tickles!” she laughed. Her eyes glinted. Still squeezed her eyes shut. She clutched her head in her hands. This was how Crest-of-the-Wave got his candy. He— he— She turned and ran.

She didn’t stop running until she got to the drainpipe. Part of her wanted there to be glass rats waiting for her, or the faceless old puppet, or something. Something she could throw stones at, something she could hit—something she could hate. She climbed the drainpipe to the roof, ready to splinter her fists against the gargoyle.

As soon as he looked at her, though, her anger blew away like a puff of fog in a breeze. “How could he?” she sobbed. “How could he *do* that?”

The gargoyle shook his weathered old head. “How could anyone do anything?” he asked softly in return.

## Chapter 11

**S**till went straight to Hurdle's shop the next morning. She didn't stop at Attic's stall—she didn't think she could face him. Face him, or ignore the longing in his eyes whenever he looked at her. Not any more. Oh, why did life have to be so tangled? She just wanted each day to erase the one before.

Of course, Hurdle's wasn't open when she got there. "Oh... come on, where are you?" she muttered, looking around as if the old puppet might have crept up behind her. She paced back and forth, then sat down on the shop's steps. Her gears needed some oil, but that could wait.

*Crack!* The door hit her in the back. "Ow!" she exclaimed. She jumped to her feet.

Hurdle peered at her suspiciously from behind the door. "Eh? What? Oh, it's you." He opened it all the way. "Thought it might be a bill collector. Splintering nuisances, they are. Well, come in. I think it's ready."

The violin lay on a soft white square of flannel on the counter. Still rushed over to it, then hesitated. "Oh, go ahead," Hurdle said gruffly. "It's fine."

Still picked it up gingerly and turned it over. The blemish was gone. Her violin looked as good as new. "Thank you," she whispered. A single drop of oil ran down her cheek.

"Oh, it wasn't that hard. Pretty straightforward, really." Hurdle dug another square of flannel out of his apron. "Here."

"Thanks," she sniffled. She tried to hand it back to him, but he waved it away.

"Never mind. Throw it in, part of the package. Call it a bonus. Eh? You tell that to Attic, mind. You tell him you got a bonus out of me." The old puppet snorted. "That'll set him back a pace, won't it?"

Still nodded, not really listening to his grumbles. “Oh, here,” she said suddenly, remembering the licorice in her pocket. She laid the pieces of candy on his counter. “I hope that’s all right.”

“Hm.” Hurdle crossed his arms. “That’s a fair bit more than you had yesterday, isn’t it? Mind me asking...?”

Still couldn’t meet his eyes. “Hm,” the old puppet grunted again, his arms still crossed, his eyes still on her. “You know, he’s not half as smart as he thinks he is. Not about things that matter.”

Still nodded sadly. “I know.”

Hurdle scratched his elbow absent-mindedly. “Asked around about you last night, after I put your violin down in the basement to cure. Heard about the, um, the shows you put on.”

“Oh, did you?” He wasn’t going to ask her to play it, was he? Oh, please, not that.

“Mm hm.” He sighed. “And I think—I think as long as you’re doing that, it’d be a good idea if you weren’t hanging around his stall as much as you have been. You understand? Like I said, he’s not half as smart as he thinks he is, and I’d hate to see him hurt.”

Still nodded again. “Me too.” She hugged the violin to her chest, turned, and left.

And so the gargoyle became Still’s only friend. She still saw Attic in the market, almost every day, but she no longer spent whole mornings at his stall devouring one book after another. They were always polite when they spoke to each other, but a gulf had opened up between them that he didn’t know how to cross, and that she didn’t want.

She saw Crest-of-the-Wave occasionally, too. The first time it happened, the day after she got her violin back, he whooshed past her on his skates with a “Hey there!” that made her jump. The day after that, he rolled up beside her at Kettle’s.

“Two,” he said, tossing a handful of gumdrops onto the counter. He winked at her. “Cold day.”



“Yes, it is.” She put two gumdrops of her own on the counter. “Just the usual, thanks.”

“Hey, I’ve got it.” Crest-of-the-Wave reached for her gumdrops, but Still put her own hand on top of them first.

“Thanks, but I’ll take care of it.” She kept her hand there until Crest-of-the-Wave pulled his back.

“So, d’you want one or two?” Kettle asked Crest-of-the-Wave.

Crest-of-the-Wave drummed his fingers on the counter. “Stuff happens sometimes, you know,” he said to Still levelly.

“I know,” she replied, just as levelly. “And people do things, and then other people find out about them, and have to make choices.”

Crest-of-the-Wave scooped up his gumdrops and tossed them one by one into a garbage can a few feet away. He skated away without another word. He didn’t say hello to Still any more after that, and she saw no reason to say it to him.

And so only the gargoyle was left. As winter thickened around them, he told Still stories about what the streets had been like years ago, when all the lanterns were lit and puppets on stilts swished back and forth waving signs for different stores. He told her about hearing cheers the first time puppets had gone to the moon and back, and about the awful day when the city had awoken to discover that Key the Cutter was gone.

“Don’t you ever wish you could see the rest of the world?” she asked the gargoyle one evening. She sat beside him on the roof, kicking her feet gently against the icicles that hung down from the eaves. Every once in a while she kicked a little too hard, and an icicle fell to the street with a *tink*.

The gargoyle was quiet for so long that Still thought he had fallen asleep. But then he rustled its stony wings and sighed. “Don’t you?”

“Oh, I’ve already seen it,” she said. “I grew up far, far away, in a village on the edge of the desert. When I was little, I was stolen by lions. They sold me to pirates, and *they* put me

to work in the glue mines. It took me *years* to escape from them.”

“Mm hm. Do you think you’ll ever escape from here?” the gargoyle asked.

Still opened her mouth, then closed it. “I don’t know,” she finally replied. “I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“Well, what would Key have done?” the gargoyle said.

“I don’t know.” Still repeated. She laughed. “If she’d wanted to escape from somewhere, she would probably just have picked the lock with a feather, un-knit her sweater, and climbed down the yarn.”

“I mean the real Key,” the gargoyle said. “Key the Great, Key the Cutter, Key who was the first puppet to cut her strings and walk where she wanted to.”

“I don’t know,” Still said, exasperated. “Anyway, that was *ages* ago. She must be sawdust by now!”

The gargoyle shook his head. “I’m not so sure. I think that as long as there are puppets who need to escape, there’ll be a Key to help them cut their strings.”

“But I don’t have any strings,” Still protested. She waved her arms. “See?”

“Sometimes the strings are inside,” the gargoyle said. He reached out suddenly to touch the dent on Still’s face. She jerked her head back. “See?” the gargoyle said. “*Something* pulled you away. And something keeps you from playing your violin, even though you look at it every morning the way a squeaky puppet looks at oil.”

“But—but I wouldn’t know where to start,” Still said once again. “And I don’t even think I want to.”

They spoke no more that night.

The next morning, as Still trudged up to the market, she decided that she would get the gargoyle a scarf as a present. The midwinter eclipse was coming up, when families gave each other gifts (had she ever done that?). *He probably hasn’t had a present in years*, she thought. *Maybe never*. She had

saved half-a-dozen gumdrops over the course of a week. Another couple of gumdrops and some sugar sprinkles in change, and she'd be able to get him a scarf long enough to cover his knees.

But gumdrops were harder to come by in the market now that winter had arrived. If she wanted to earn that kind of candy—for herself, or for the gargoyle's present—she would have to start playing higher up in the City. Up where the puppets' shoes matched and their stitching was done with silk thread. Up where—where— She shook her head so hard that the thought fell out and rolled away. She hadn't seen a single paper boat since she got her violin back from Hurdle's. The trick, she had finally realized, was not just to not think about certain things, but to not think about not thinking about them, either.

It took Still more than an hour to make her way uphill into a nice part of the city. Her feet were tired by the time she found a tidy little street full of tidy little shops. The signs were all freshly painted in sensible colors, and puppets in clean new clothes were getting on and off bright red streetcars on the corner.

She found a newspaper on a bench that was so fresh, the ink still smelled faintly of cinnamon. She folded the comics page into a neat little box and set it at her feet, then bent her head and began to play. The fingers of her left hand fluttered in the air, sliding up and down on strings that weren't there. Her right arm was as graceful as the neck of a swan. Even though she wasn't making a sound, she was playing as beautifully as she ever had.

Which is why she was so surprised when an old puppet with frizzy white hair sniffed, "*I never!* Out here in the street like that!" he said to the puppet walking beside him.

"It's shameful!" the puppet beside him agreed. She glared at Still. The two marched away arm-in-arm.

Still kept playing. Some of the other puppets passing by sniffed as well, but a few dropped sugar sprinkles into her box. Just before lunch time, a strawberry gumdrop *plonked* into the box. Still played on. As the shadows grew longer, the sugar sprinkles began to pile up. Finally, just as the shopkeepers were taking in their sandwich signs, a puppet wearing a turban and big black boots tossed her another gumdrop. She had enough to buy the gargoyle a scarf!

Still scooped up her box and turned. And froze. And ducked into the doorway of the shop behind her. She pretended to study the microscopes and tweezers behind the window as the reflections of a handful of puppets went by. Most were as young as she was, but in their midst was an older puppet. His clothes were blue and orange, and he wore a polka-dot hat. He had black curls painted on his forehead, and a big smile painted on his face.

The younger puppets all had instruments tucked under their arms: flutes, trumpets, glockenspiels, and midget tubas. Still recognized some of them from—from—

“You’re all playing quite nicely,” the older puppet said warmly. “Especially you, Mustard.” He put his hand on the puppet’s shoulder and gave her a friendly squeeze. “I think you’re just about ready for some special lessons.”

“Thank you, Mister Leaf,” the young puppet said, “But I don’t know if my parents can— I mean—”

“Don’t worry about that,” the older puppet said. “I’m sure we can find a way.”

The streetcar arrived with a rattle. The puppets boarded it. *Clang clang!* It rolled away. Still waited until she stopped shaking, then set off on her long walk back to the market, back to the fog.

She was so quiet that evening that the gargoyle finally said, “Are you mad at me for what I said about strings?”

“What? Oh, no, I’m not mad.” Still shook her head, rattling her thoughts around. When they came to rest, they were just as

jumbled as they had been before. “I just heard something today...”

“Something bad?” the gargoyle asked.

Still nodded. “Something worse than bad,” she said. She hugged her legs and put her chin on her knees. “What would you do if you knew someone was going to do something like that?”

The gargoyle shrugged his stony shoulders. “I’d whistle until the police came,” he said. “Then I’d tell them everything I knew.”

Still raised her hand to her face. The edges of the dent in her cheek had worn smooth, as had the other nicks and scratches of the past few months. “But what if you knew that they’d put strings on you?” she whispered. “What if you knew they’d screw eyehooks into your elbows and knees, and run black silk strings through them, so that you could never move your own arms and legs again?”

“I’d do it anyway. If you let something bad happen, that’s almost the same as doing it yourself.” The gargoyle shrugged once again. “But you have to remember, I’m not a puppet, I’m a gargoyle. Maybe the last gargoyle left in Key’s City. If I—”

“Key...” Still whispered. The whirling thoughts in her head fell into place, *clunk chunk clunk*, like the pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. “*She’d* know what to do!” She leapt to her feet. “And you said she was still here, didn’t you? Do you know where she is?”

The gargoyle shook his head. “I didn’t say that. And even if she were, I don’t think she could help you.”

Still gasped. “She *is* still here, isn’t she? Did she ask you not to tell? Is that it?”

“I don’t think she could help you,” the gargoyle repeated. “I think you have to cut your own strings this time.”

Still laughed angrily. “I’m so stupid. I thought you cared, but you just want to keep me here. That’s it, isn’t it? You’re

afraid that if I find her, I'll stay with her, and you'll be all alone again. That's why you won't tell me where she is."

The gargoyle looked at her with the love and sadness of centuries in his eyes. "All right," he said. He held her violin out to her. "Follow this. Follow this, wherever it leads. That's all I can tell you"

Still took the heartwood violin in her hands. Her thumb could feel the faint groove left by— by— She shook her head angrily. She had just managed to get all her thoughts to fit together—she was *not* going to shake them up again, not when something so important needed to be done.

"But how can I follow a violin?" Still asked. "It can't float through the air like a balloon, or run like a clock. What am I supposed to do?"

The gargoyle bowed his head, but said nothing. Still begged and wheedled, she blustered and raged, but the gargoyle wouldn't say another word.

"Fine!" Still finally blurted. "Be like that! I thought you were my friend, but you're really just a horrible old piece of stone. You don't care at all!" She slithered down the drainpipe with her violin in her arms. Little drops of oil welled up in her eyes as she ran through the street, heedless of where she was going.

She ran and ran past grimy walls and burned-out streetlights. Suddenly she slipped, skidded, and fell on a dirty patch of refrozen snow. Her violin flew from her hand and tumbled end over end through the air. "Noooo!" Still shrieked as it vanished over a low brick wall. She heard a faint *kersplash*.

## Chapter 12

**S**till scrambled to her feet. The wall was only a little taller than she was. She grabbed the top and pulled herself up onto it.

Two stories below her, her violin bobbed gently up and down in the cold, dark water of the canal. Even as Still watched, the current began to sweep it away.

Still gulped. She *could* jump. After all, she *was* made of wood—she would float too. But how would she get back up? There were no ladders on the side of the canal, no docks or stairways that she could see. And it was getting dark...

She pulled her feet beneath her, then stood up shakily. The top of the wall was only half as wide as a sidewalk, and splashed here and there with treacherous patches of ice. She walked as quickly as she could, glancing down every few moments to keep her violin in sight.

She was trying so hard not to lose sight of it, and not to slip on the ice, that she was almost on top of the stairway before she noticed it. It was so narrow that she had to turn sideways and keep her hands on the wall as she clattered down it.

The steps led to a narrow footpath running along the canal's edge. There was ice here too, and frozen slime, and some of the stones were loose. And it was dark even darker here than it had been up on the street—so dark that she wondered if the tiny patch of stillness in the middle of the canal was really her violin, or just her imagination.

Still heard a echoing, gurgling sound up ahead. *Now what?* she wondered. The answer turned out to be a tunnel, a round-roofed tunnel big enough to swallow a coal barge. Its mouth was covered with a heavy iron grill. "Oh, no," Still moaned as the current swept her violin between its bars.

She ran the last few steps, heedless of the ice. The bars were too close together—she could reach through, but couldn't squeeze past them. And her violin was disappearing into the darkness!

Still looked around wildly. There wasn't a gate. There wasn't an alarm bell for her to ring, or any sign of a secret door. There was just a pale strip of sky above her, the blank walls of the canal, and the broken stones of the narrow path beneath her feet.

Still felt the violin tug at her heart as it floated further and further away. If she lost it, she would lose everything, everything that mattered. She bent down and picked up a loose paving stone, staggered to the edge of the canal, and jumped in.

Without the stone, she would have bobbed back up like a cork. With it in her arms, she sank deeper and deeper into the cold, dark, dirty water. She squeezed her eyes shut so tightly that bright patterns of light swirled on the backs of her eyelids. The oil in her joints felt like it was freezing solid. She could end like this, she realized. She could be snagged on some thrown-away piece of machinery under the water, and trapped down in the darkness until her clockwork rusted solid. No-one would ever find her. No-one would ever know.

Still hung on just a moment longer than she could bear, then let go of the stone. *Whoosh!* She shot up through the water like a clown fired out of a circus cannon.

"Pfaaah!" she spluttered as her head broke through the surface. She looked around wildly. There was the iron grill—and there was the sky, on the other side of it! She'd done it! The current had swept her beneath the grill! She was in the tunnel.

But now that same current was carrying deeper and deeper beneath the city. Faint glowing patches of fungus began to appear on the roof of the tunnel. They looked like moonlit clouds, silver and misshapen. Still paddled forward, but



suddenly spotted a side tunnel leading away from the one she was in. She stopped and let herself float again. She couldn't see her violin any longer. There was no way to tell where the current had taken it.

"Oh, what should I do?" she fretted. "What should I do?"

As if in answer, someone—or something—giggled softly behind her. She whirled around. "Who's there?" she called out. No-one answered.

"Hello?" she said loudly. "Can you help me? Please?"

"Tee hee, tee hee." The giggles seemed to come from all around her. "She's lost... she's lost... tee hee..." Still whirled around again in the water, peering into the darkness. A patch of fungus on the wall rippled slightly. Tiny feet scampered across stone.

Glass rats! Glass rats, with diamond teeth and sharp little appetites. Another patch of fungus rippled, then another. There must be dozens of them!

"What do you want?" she cried out.

"Why, oil, of course," one rat squeaked. "Slippery puppet oil, and crunchy puppet wood." The other rats giggled, "Tee hee, tee hee."

"I'm afraid I d-d-don't have any w-w-wood or oil to g-g-give you," Still said, her teeth chattering with cold and fear.

"Well, if you won't *give* it to us, we'll just have to *take* it," the little ratty voice squeaked.

"But what if I won't let you?" Still asked.

"Let us?" the rat squeaked. "Tee hee, tee hee! You don't need to let us. It's already ours! Everything that comes down here without a good reason is ours."

"But I *have* a good reason!" Still said. "A very good reason!"

The giggling stopped. "And what reason is that?" the rat squeaked.

"I'm looking for something," Still said. "Something I lost. Something very important."

“And what would that be?” the rat asked suspiciously.

Still hesitated. If she told them about her violin, they might eat it! She thought she would rather be eaten herself. “I’m looking for Key,” Still said. “Key the Cutter. I have to warn her about something.”

There was a moment of silence, then the rats began giggling again in the darkness. “That’s not why you’re here,” the little rat voice squeaked. “We can tell. Rats can *always* tell when someone’s lying. Now, perhaps if you give us your arms and legs, we’ll let the rest of you go.”

“All right!” she said. “All right, I lied. I’m looking for—I’m looking for my violin. It fell in the water, and I have to get it back.”

There was a longer silence, but the rats started giggling again. “Still not the truth, still not the truth,” the little ratty voice said with glee.

“All right! All right!” Still shouted. “I’m not looking for Key. I’m not really looking for my violin! I’m looking for—I’m—I’ve lost myself! That’s why I’m here! I put myself somewhere, but now I can’t remember where that was, and I’m trying to find me again. Now, if you want to eat me, then come and eat me and get it over with!”

Silence filled the tunnel. It stretched and stretched until Still thought she would scream, and then the little voice said, “Rats, she figured it out.” Little feet scampered away in the darkness.

Still paddled over to the side of the tunnel and pulled herself up onto the walkway. Her mind was as numb as her hands and feet. She was safe from the rats, but her violin was gone. It could be anywhere in the maze of dark tunnels. All of a sudden she felt too weak to keep looking, too weak to walk, too weak to even stand. Drops of oil welled up in her eyes and ran down her cheeks. She fell down in a heap and put her head on her arm in despair.

She had no idea how long she lay there—minutes? Hours? Her next thought came when she realized that something white

was bobbing up and down in the water in front of her. She blinked. It was still there. She blinked again, then reached out for it.

It was a tiny boat made out of neatly-folded white paper. Neatly-folded paper—now what did that remind her of? She shook her head. Something was written on the side of it. She couldn't read it—the light was too faint. She sat up wearily and held it close to the nearest patch of fungus.

Someone had painted a picture of a puppet on the side of the boat. Written underneath it were the words, "Have you seen our daughter?" Still peered at the picture. The puppet looked familiar somehow. She was wearing black and white—

"And eight shades of green," Still whispered, there in the darkness. The paper boat fluttered like a bird trying to escape from someone's hand. Still realized that she was trembling. She knelt down and gently set the paper boat back in the water. "Go on," she whispered, pushing it out into the current with one finger. "You go ahead, and I'll follow you."

The little boat turned around once and floated gently away. Still walked along beside it. Black and white, and eight shades of green... Eight shades of green... She *knew* that little puppet, she was sure of it. But why was her picture painted on the side of a paper boat?

When the boat reached the split in the tunnel, it took the right-hand branch. Still followed it. It turned left at the next branch and disappeared around a corner. Still slipped into the water, paddled to the other side, and climbed out again.

She came around the corner, and stopped. A whole flotilla of little paper boats lay in the water in front of her, carried there and then abandoned by the current. She knelt down and picked one up. It had the same picture painted on its side. "Please help us find our daughter," was written on this one. She picked up another. "If you see our daughter, please tell her that we love her," it said.

She picked up a third boat. “Still, please come home,” she read aloud. Suddenly she hugged the little boat to her chest. “Elbow...” she whispered. “Ramble... Oh, where have I been?”

She pulled the boats from the water one after another. They spilled out of her arms and onto the walkway, but she didn’t care. She was sobbing, but she didn’t care, because she knew what she was going to find.

And there it was—her violin. The current that had carried the boats to this little backwater had brought her violin as well. She picked it up gently and hugged it close.

## *Chapter 13*

**S**till walked out into the dawn with her violin in one hand, and a paper boat in the other. A bird chirruped in a tree, somewhere in the distance, then fell silent. It felt as if the whole world was waiting for a hidden orchestra to play the first note of a symphony that everyone knew, but no-one could remember.

The streets around her were broad and clean. The houses were as tidy as Elbow's creases. Her fear lay in her belly like cold soup, but she kept walking. The streets began to fill with puppets on their way to work, or school, or just out to enjoy the crisp, cold day. A few stared at Still as she strode past them, but she paid them no attention. She knew that if she hesitated, even for a moment, her fear would turn into a whirlpool and suck her down.

The park next to Mister Leaf's house was as tidy as she remembered. The steps leading up to its front door weren't worn at all, not like the ones in front of the buildings down in the fog by the market. The high, hesitant sound of a flute floated through the air from the second-story window.

Still set the paper boat on the sidewalk in front of the steps, lay her violin down gently beside it, and bowed her head. Slowly, she raised her left arm, bent at the elbow. Slowly, so slowly, she tilted her head to one side, and brought her right arm up, the wrist and elbow loose, just as she had been taught. Slowly, silently, she began to play a slow, sad waltz.

The wind rustled the last few paper leaves on the trees around her. A squirrel with a squeaky tail scampered across a branch. A child's balloon blew by. All of them were louder than Still's music. It was as silent as deep snow, and it spread out in waves around her. First the puppets in the nearby houses

heard it. They set down their gossip and their chores and stared at one another, listening to the quietness spreading around them. The streetcars fell silent, then the children in their playgrounds. Even the roustabouts working on the balloons overhead stopped their chatter and bluster.

Puppets began to gather around Still in ones and twos. “What is she doing?” they asked one another. “Why is she playing like that?” But no-one had an answer.

Finally a police puppet rode up on a shiny blue bicycle. He stood it on its kickstand, straightened his serious hat, and scowled. “What’s going on here, then?” he asked. Still just kept playing.

“Excuse me, miss, but I asked, what’s going on here?” the police puppet repeated. He took a step toward her.

“Perhaps I can explain,” a warm voice said. Still opened her eyes. Mister Leaf was standing on his front steps. His student was standing beside him, her flute in her hands, her eyes as big and as dark as the gargoyle’s. Mister Leaf’s hand was on her shoulder. She looked straight at Still. Still looked straight back at her.

“Well, I’d be grateful if you would,” the police puppet said. “It’s a mighty strangeness to me, it is.”

“This poor thing was one of my students,” Mister Leaf said. “She had an accident—look, you can see the mark on her cheek. She ran away from home several months ago. Her parents have been very, very worried. I’m sure that—”

But no-one ever got to find out what Mister Leaf was sure of. The young puppet at his side shook off his hand and walked slowly down the steps. Still kept playing. The young puppet watched her for a moment longer, then set her flute down beside Still’s violin. She tucked her elbows in at her sides, then raised her hands as if the flute was in them. She waited just a moment to catch Still’s rhythm, then began to play silence as well.

Someone gasped. Someone said, “Oh my.” Mister Leaf went, “Tsk tsk,” and walked down the steps himself. “That won’t help anything,” he said to his student sternly. “Why, you’ll just encourage her. She needs—”

But no-one ever got to find out what Mister Leaf thought Still needed. One of the puppets in the crowd stepped forward. “I remember,” she whispered. A single drop of oil ran down each of her cheeks. She sniffled and wiped them away, then raised a ghostly trumpet to her lips and began to play along as well.

The silence was almost deafening. Together, the three puppets played Still’s slow waltz, dum dah dah, dum dah dah, all the way to the end. When they were done, Still lowered her arms.

“I didn’t fall,” she whispered. The world was so quiet that everyone around her could hear her as clearly as her lips were right against their ears. “I didn’t have an accident. I had *him*.”

And then the stillness was broken as Elbow and Ramble pushed their way through the crowd. “Still! Oh, Still!” They threw their arms around her.

“Oh, Still,” Ramble finally said, relaxing her grip on her daughter just enough so that she could look at the nicks and scratches on Still’s face. “You’re all grown up now. Are you all right?”

Finally, finally, Still began to cry. “No,” she said, hugging her parents close. “But I will be.”

It took Still a while to tell her story. When she was done, the police took Mister Leaf away. “Strings are too good for him!” Elbow said harshly as the three of them walked home. “After what he did—your violin, that poor girl’s flute, that woman’s trumpet... Chains are what they ought to put on him!”

“Strings will be enough,” Still said quietly.

## *Chapter 14*

**I**t was several days before she could slip away and go back to the market. Stuffed in her bag was the biggest, brightest orange scarf she had been able to find.

She took three wrong turns on her way to the gargoyle's warehouse. Finally, she spotted the familiar drainpipe. "Hello," she called out as she climbed it. "Are you awake? I've brought you a present."

But when she reached the top of the drainpipe, all she found was a worn old statue with the remains of a fierce look carved on its face. She stared at it for a long moment, wondering if she had imagined their conversations, or whether he had finally decided that nothing here needed guarding any more.

She wrapped the scarf around its neck, climbed back down the drainpipe, and headed for the market. She had a feeling that Attic would like to share a hot cup of oil. And maybe, one day, to hear her play.



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**G**reg Wilson was born and raised on Vancouver Island, where it rains so much that people get a rust rather than a tan. He lives in Toronto now with a wonderful woman and their particularly wonderful daughter. When he's not trying to get her to eat her vegetables (the daughter, that is), he teaches scientists how to program and writes stories like this one. He apologizes for the lack of pirates, and will try to do better next time.

If you'd like to read more of Greg's stories, you can find him online at <http://sensibleadventures.com>.

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