KELLY LINK

THE

BOOK

 \bigcirc

'Lush and visionary' CASSANDRA CLARE **'Spectacularly weird'** LEIGH BARDUGO

F

'Playful and harrowing, surreal and sagacious, replete with gods and other monsters' HOLLY BLACK First published in the USA in 2024 by Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York

First published in the UK in 2024 by Head of Zeus This paperback edition first published in the United Kingdom in 2025 by Head of Zeus, part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Copyright © Kelly Link, 2024

The moral right of Kelly Link to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be: i) reproduced or transmitted in any form, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by means of any information storage or retrieval system without prior permission in writing from the publishers; or ii) used or reproduced in any way for the training, development or operation of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, including generative AI technologies. The rights holders expressly reserve this publication from the text and data mining exception as per Article 4(3) of the Digital Single Market Directive (EU) 2019/790

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

975312468

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (PB): 9781804548479 ISBN (eBook): 9781804548431

Typeset by Silicon Chips

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CRo 4YY



Bloomsbury Publishing Plc 50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK Bloomsbury Publishing Ireland Limited, 29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 AY28, Ireland

> HEAD OF ZEUS LTD 5–8 Hardwick Street London EC1R 4RG

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.headofzeus.com For product safety related questions contact productsafety@bloomsbury.com

The Book of Laura

There were three. Where were they? Someplace they shouldn't be. They couldn't get out. When they found a way out, someone else followed them. Something came along with them.

Something happened. Something had happened to them. What? Something that shouldn't have happened. Had they died? Were they dead? Surely they were not dead. But if they were dead, then what was this place? You couldn't get out. This terrible place. Sometimes together and sometimes apart. There was no comfort in being together, but it was worse to be separated. Sometimes each of them was alone and that was worst of all. And now? Where there had been three, no question about that, now there were four.

They had been in an awful place. A blotted, attenuated, chilly nothingness—how to describe it? Later on, one of them said, "I think I remember a lot of trees. There was a dirty path. And a clearing with someone in it." Someone else said the only way to describe it was that it was like being an ant that had fallen into an Icee machine with only one flavor selection: expired-milk insomniac pushing dirty bad-luck needles through the hangnail skin of an endless, resentful night. Which was poetic, sure, and maybe not inaccurate, but it didn't give you the whole picture. Really, you had to have been there.

They had been imprisoned. Then there had been a seeping warmth, a kind of shiver as if someone you'd once known how to be had walked past a door, and though that door was closed, they had pressed against it until there was the very thinnest seam—Such small stitches, whose hand had made them? Who had hung the hinges on this door?—but *they* were very thin now, too, and slipped through that loose stitch, one by one by one. And one more. Who?

There were four of them now. That was the first mystery.

The second mystery was where they found themselves. They had been in that other place. And then they dragged themselves out and found themselves in Mr. Anabin's music room at Lewis Latimer Public School. They knew it was his room because there was Mr. Anabin's baby grand. There was the poster of Hildegard of Bingen on the wall in front of them. De La Soul on the wall behind them. (Four is the magic number.) Dark outside the windows, and Mr. Anabin himself, playing a minor scale on the baby grand.

When he saw them, Mr. Anabin closed the piano lid and rested his hands in his lap. "So," he said. The sound of a human voice in a human space was terrible and unfamiliar. "I thought it might be something like this."

None of the four moved from where they were. Muddled together, they occupied less space than one or two would have in their proper state. The cracked linoleum floor was visible to them through the drifty suggestion of their own limbs.

Mr. Anabin approached slowly, as if, should he startle them, they might go flying through a keyhole, a window, the pockmarked ceiling tiles. He stood looking for a long time, and then he said, "Laura. Laura Hand."

He made a little movement with two fingers. And here was Laura Hand (up until a year ago, quite sure of her place in the world) manifested, bewildered, and altogether both less and more herself than she had been for a long time. Her companions eddied around her like conturbations of dust.

"Mohammed Gorch." Mr. Anabin flicked his fingers again. And there was Mo Gorch, who was a grade below Laura and Daniel but nevertheless in Laura's third-period calculus class and fifth-period A.P. history. He was a friend of Susannah's.

"And Daniel Knowe. Of course." His fingers delineating a shape. Here was Daniel, who was dear to Laura. He and she and Susannah had a band, My Two Hands Both Knowe You.

Laura pinched her own arm. She was herself again: the sturdy architecture of her ribs, pulpy heart with its four chambers and the doors that open and shut, open and shut, the hasty blood rushing through, a red mark appearing where she had pinched. And yet something was still missing.

Wasn't she?

"Where's Susannah?" Laura said, looking around for her sister. "Susannah! What did you do?"

It was always Susannah who had done whatever it was. Wasn't it?

But Susannah wasn't here.

Laura's entire skin felt wrong. She felt squashed and stretched somehow, like a piece of Play-Doh in a warm hand, and she felt like the hand, too. She thought, Well, I am a Hand. And then, Perhaps I have been given an experimental drug.

"I'm going to sit down," Mo said. "Just for a minute." Instead of sitting down on one of the chairs, he sat down on the floor and put his head in his hands.

Daniel said, "Someone lost a pencil."

He reached up and pulled a pencil out that had been stuck in a ceiling tile. (For how long? Who knew?) That was how tall Daniel was. The pencil was very short. Someone had chewed on it.

Laura reached out and took it from him. She dropped it on the floor. "Don't touch that," she said. "No one wants it back."

"Something very strange has been happening," Mo said.

"Yeah," Laura said. "But it's okay now. Isn't it?" Mo looked up at her. She held out her hand, and he took it in his own, startlingly warm and solid. She pulled him up onto his feet. Once, in calculus, he'd loaned her a piece of graph paper.

Having established they were all together and in the world

again, at last they looked at Mr. Anabin. After all, it was his music room.

Mr. Anabin was a middle-aged-ish, brown-ish man. Tall-ish. Terrible posture. His wiry hair was short, and there was just a little gray in it. His hands were elegant, expressive. Manicured nails. Fingers long but not too long. They were, without question, the hands of a music teacher. The previous year, the PTA had raised enough money for the school to offer chorus and band as electives. Hence, Mr. Anabin. He played piano during school concerts. Chose and directed the school musical. Ran detention occasionally. He didn't seem anxious to be anyone's favorite teacher, but neither was he one of the bad ones. He wore blue jeans and T-shirts with affirmational statements on them. There was something in his eyes that, taken in concert with the T-shirts, made students feel vaguely uneasy. It was a certain look. Was it sardonic? Or only a little knowing? After a while, you didn't look into his eyes. But then, as far as anyone knew, Mr. Anabin lived alone. Once, Susannah had said to Laura that sometimes during band practice, she found herself imagining Mr. Anabin's laundry, Mr. Anabin sorting his whites from his colors. After all, no one else was going to do it for him. Folding his shirts: BE YOUR OWN KIND OF BEAUTY, WE CAN ACCOMPLISH MIRACLES IF WE BELIEVE WE CAN. TODAY IS GOING TO BE THE MOST AMAZING DAY AND TOMORROW WILL BE EVEN BETTER. WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU LEMONS SAY THANK YOU, LEMONS ARE DELICIOUS AND RE-FRESHING. It was pretty fucking depressing, Susannah said, when you thought about it, which Laura didn't understand. Laundry was just laundry. There wasn't anything there to be depressed about.

Mr. Anabin's gaze seemed fixed on something just past Mo's shoulder. Laura, looking where he looked, could not see anyone standing there. And yet she felt sure someone was there.

Nonetheless she said, "Everything's fine. It's all going to be fine."

"Why are we wearing these clothes?" Daniel said.

"They're from *Bye Bye Birdie*," Mo said. He sounded astonished to know anything at all. Laura hadn't ever really hung out with Mo, although of course she was aware of him: his grandmother was Caitlynn Hightower. Laura had all of her books. Other things Laura knew: Mo was gay. His mother was dead. "From last year. I'm Albert. I'm wearing Albert's clothes. I know that because I was Wardrobe. What's with the bare feet? Is that weird? That we don't have shoes or socks on?"

"I wasn't in *Bye Bye Birdie*," Daniel said. "Because of football practice. I don't know why I'm barefoot. I have no idea what's going on right now."

"Looks like you're Maude's Dishwasher," Mo said. "Laura's Rose."

Laura looked down. Her feet were filthy—Daniel's and Mo's were in a similar state—and she was wearing, what? A poodle skirt. She hadn't even noticed.

"Clothes seemed the least of the problem," Mr. Anabin said. "I took what was nearest to hand. Be quiet for a moment. There's one here I don't know. Who or what are you? What is your business?"

Something seemed to move, or perhaps something that had been in motion now grew very still. There was an exhalation, a sigh, as if Mr. Anabin had asked the air a question, and the fine hairs rose at the nape of Laura's neck.

"Something touched me," Daniel said. "I felt something."

They all felt it now. It rushed around them, tugged at their ridiculous clothing, Laura's cheerful skirt. The blue hair ribbon, which she hadn't realized she was wearing, came undone and went whipping around the music room until Mo caught it as it flew past. He gave it to Laura, who tied her hair back with trembling fingers.

Mr. Anabin made that small motion with his hand again, and then here at last was the other one, the last one. But not altogether there, still not entirely. A pair of pale eyes. A mouth. The pencil Laura had dropped on the floor went sailing up into the air, point first, and stuck into the ceiling again. "The end of the pencil is just as important as the other end," Mo said. Laura had no idea what he meant by that. Mo, she was beginning to remember, said a lot of things that didn't seem to mean anything.

"Speak," Mr. Anabin said. "Tell us your name."

"Oh," a voice like the scrape of an empty lighter said. "That was lost a long time ago. So long ago."

"Then pick a new one," said Mr. Anabin. "Quickly."

"They were all lost," the voice said. "I lost them all."

"Excuse me, but you can't have lost them all?" Mo said. He pointed at one of Mr. Anabin's posters. "I can think of hundreds. Hildegard. That's a name. Aretha. Prince." He pointed again. "Bowie."

"Bowie," the voice repeated.

"Bowie then," Mr. Anabin said. "You'll forgive me if you don't resemble yourself, but time is short and there is very little of you left." He blew on his hands, rubbed them together, and made another gesture, this one more extravagant.

And there was the last of the four, back in the world again. He wore Conrad Birdie's biker jacket and white scarf. Was barefoot and dirty. Laura was certain she had never seen him before in her life. A boy their age. Longish, sandy hair and a white face she was not sure about. Human faces didn't really look like that, did they? Like a box accidentally closed up with something alive inside it. Mismatched eyes like Bowie on the wall.

"Perhaps a bit too much like," Mr. Anabin said, and gestured. And both eyes were blue.

"Can he do that?" Laura said to Daniel and Mo. "Just make a person? Is that what he did to us?"

"I could give you each six pairs of wings, a heart of glass, and poison glands," Mr. Anabin said. "But there would be no point to it. You are as you were. I made you out of yourselves, what you were and had been."

"I have no idea what that means," Daniel said. "And I don't want to know, either. We should go."

Mo said, "Something happened, but I can't remember it.

Except that it was bad. We should all go home now before more bad things happen. Mr. Anabin, catch you later."

"No!" Laura said. They all looked at her. The look on Mr. Anabin's face was patient. Interested. His T-shirt gently encouraging. YOU ARE SPECIAL IN WAYS YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW YET.

She said, "I mean, not yet. Mr. Anabin, how did we get here? What was that place, the place we were in before?"

"I'm leaving," Mo said. It was as if Laura were not standing right there, as if her desires, her questions were immaterial, as if she herself were still immaterial. "You coming? Laura? Daniel? Bowie Not Bowie?"

"No!" Laura said. And stamped her foot. "I want to know what happened! I'm not leaving until I know."

"It's too late," Bowie said. "He's here."

"Then tell him to go away," Laura said. She didn't look to see who Bowie meant. (If she didn't look, then no one would be there.) "There are enough people here right now."

"We were dead." That was Daniel. "That's what happened. That's what you remember, Mo. That's what you want to know, Laura. Isn't it? We died. We were dead. Whose dog is that?"

Laura turned to look.

A large dog sat at the threshold of the music room. Maybe the music room door had been open all this time, though Laura thought it had been closed. (Or had not been there at all.) But then, how had she and the others come in—Through the windows? Like Cathy Earnshaw's ghost?—and where had the dog come from? Laura began to wonder, looking at it, if it was a dog at all. That squashed feeling came over her again, except somehow the opposite was happening, too, as if she were shrinking and expanding at the same time. Her skin suddenly too loose and Laura—the most essential part of her—too small, so small she was suddenly afraid she might slip out of her own mouth or eyes and dissipate altogether, leaving only the emptied sleeve of her skin in a starched froth of poodle skirt. Daniel had said something she knew she should have paid attention to. He'd said something, made some joke. Had it been funny? She'd wanted to laugh when he said it, but then she'd seen the dog.

The dog in the doorway had white fur, matted and coarse and bristling; a voluptuary's red tongue lolled out. Its ears were latched flat against the prow of its head. It was such a very large dog the room seemed smaller: even Daniel seemed diminished in its presence. What was it Daniel had said?

"Good dog," Mo said in a gentle voice. "Good doggie. Where did you come from? What a big, fucking, terrifying nightmare doggie. Yes. Yes, you *are*."

"It isn't a dog," Daniel said. "It's a wolf."

"It isn't a wolf," Bowie said.

The thing on the threshold regarded each of them in turn as they spoke. It looked at Laura, its gaze reproachful and ravenous. At last it looked at Mr. Anabin.

Mr. Anabin's hand went up as if he were about to make some gesture that would save them all, but instead he scratched his head, shrugged, and said, "You are welcome, Bogomil. As welcome as you ever are."

Then Mr. Anabin turned his back to the open door, facing instead the windows and the night outside.

The thing upon the threshold had begun to shudder all over as Mr. Anabin spoke. It opened its jaws and panted. As Laura watched, it shimmied as if shucking off a too-tight dress, stretching and flexing, emitting little whining noises of discomfort, and then there was a person instead of a dogwolf-thing, on his hands and knees upon the floor, person mouth split open in an airless yawn. The mouth closed. The person stood up, ran his hands down his face, then held them up to better examine his nails, which were, it was true, very dirty. His hands were filthy down to the wrists, as though he had been digging a hole in a muddy garden. He wore the Mayor's costume from *Bye Bye Birdie*. Despite the dirt and the costume, he was by far the handsomest man Laura had ever seen. (Had she thought this the first time she saw him? Probably not. She could not remember the first time she had seen him.)

He had been a very large dog. But now he was not much taller than Laura. How old was he? Oh, not so very old. There are older things in the world. But still he was very old.

His bare feet like theirs were crusted with dirt. The only one wearing shoes in the music room was Mr. Anabin.

"Who are you?" That was Mo.

But Laura could tell that, like the rest of them, Mo knew.

"Am I really so forgettable?" the man said. He spoke softly enough Laura strained to hear what he was saying. He stayed where he was, leaning against the doorframe. There was something wolflike still in his posture, as if at any moment he might spring. "Quite a surprise, really, you gone from my house, all of you at once without so much as a thank-you note. And I don't mind telling you it's been some time since anything has surprised me."

Laura thought, I've changed my mind. I'd like to leave.

"How?" Daniel said. "He's standing in the doorway." So perhaps she had said it out loud.

"I don't like any part of this," Mo said. His chin was out. "I don't like the part where I'm wearing a costume from last year's musical, and *Bye Bye Birdie* is really not a great musical anyway. I never liked it. There's only one good song. It isn't that good, actually. I don't know if I remember you or not, wolf person, but I don't like *you*, either. And I definitely do not like how I seem to remember some really bad stuff happening—thanks, Daniel, by the way, for reminding me—and I also don't like the feeling I'm starting to get that, in a minute or so, something else bad is going to start happening. Like this is a bad sandwich. A sandwich where the filling is a middle-of-the-night school music room in between two slices of being dead. Who orders a sandwich like that? Nobody!"

"Will somebody please just explain what's happening?" Laura said. "*Please*. Mr. Anabin? Mr. Anabin! Who is this person?"

Mr. Anabin stayed where he was, staring at the window, his

back to them. Laura's heart was beating so quickly in her chest she thought she might die. Had she died? Oh, but she was alive now. She had a heart, and her blood moved through her heart, and as it flowed it sang, Oh alive, *oh alive*!

In the window she found Mr. Anabin's eyes. He said nothing. And there, too, was the reflection of the man who stood at the door.

"I'll introduce myself," he said, "since Anabin has no manners. You four left my house before we had much chance to become acquainted. You may call me Bogomil. No need to tell me your names. I know you. You need no names with me."

Bogomil paused. "Except." He pointed a long, filthy nail, and Laura, standing closest to Bowie, recoiled. But Bowie did not move. "I wonder if you could tell me what you are called."

"I don't know," Bowie said. He didn't sound afraid. He sounded in some place far beyond that. "I wish I knew."

"Old wine in a new bottle, I think," said Bogomil. "Or maybe only the dregs."

"His name is Bowie, you freak!" Laura said. Who did this weird person think he was? It was the middle of the night! Everyone should start being nicer and also less confusing. Although now that this person named Bogomil (Really? His name was Bogomil? It sounded like a German breakfast cereal.) was looking at her and not at Bowie, she thought perhaps she had been a little rude. Perhaps the right tack was politeness tempered with firmness. You weren't supposed to show fear with gods. No, dogs. That was what they said.

"Oh, *Laura*!" Bogomil said. He took a step into the room. Then another. "Susannah's lovely sister. Won't you cry for me. Yes. Daniel elo ello hello. Mo who doesn't know, not yet. She died of grief. And this one. There's something familiar about that famine face. No matter, really, how you got out. Just a tick and we'll put everything right again."

He took a third step.

There was something about the sound of his dirty feet on the floor that was the worst thing yet. His expression did not change, but the sound suggested contact with the world was agony. As if whatever Bogomil was made of—surely not flesh?—rejected the contact even as it occurred. Or did the floor, that unremarkable linoleum, reject Bogomil? Yes. The whole room, in a kind of agony, refuted Bogomil. He was smiling. But every footfall was a strike on a bell stopped with mud. A clot of blood trembling on a rusted wire.

Bogomil was close enough now that Laura could not escape the familiar reek of him—roses—and under the roses, something burning. Would she ever get that smell out of her clothes? Her hair? It permeated every pore, every orifice. It was the only real thing in the whole world: oh, how could Laura have forgotten? She could feel herself coldly boiling down to nothingness, a vapor. Every thought she had ever had, every stupid thing she'd ever done. Every song she'd ever figured out the chords to. Every verse. Every lyric, every key change. Every drop of night. Each bright day. Any minute now the person called Bogomil would catch them all up and Laura and the others would be carried away like a handful of loose coins.

Bogomil's finger went up, and just as Laura thought, Do something, oh do something quickly, Daniel said, "Wait. Wait! What do you mean, how we got out? Out of where? And what do you mean, 'put everything right'?"

Weren't these, more or less, the same questions Laura had been asking earlier? Not that Laura wasn't grateful Bogomil wasn't zapping them with that dirty finger, but if it hadn't been the time for questions earlier, it most definitely wasn't the time for questions now. Or the person.

"What is the taste of a soul as it is drawn from between the lips?" Bogomil said. "Who whispers in the darkness? Those are questions for which I have answers. *How—you—got—out* is my question. You will supply the answer to me. Sooner or later or much later or, if you are lucky, much sooner. Oldest brothers should keep true answers in their pockets, Daniel. Why is the sky blue? Why is the moon so full of hate? What costs more dearly, one's first death or the second? In simple words: Your guess is correct. You died. You came through the door and into my realm. And then, through some unforeseen chance, you slipped away from me. You passed yourselves through some knot or hole or oubliette, and here you are. In Anabin's realm. But you know very well you can't stay. This is no place for the dead."

As he said it, Laura knew it was true. They had died. They were dead. A flush of embarrassment crept over her, as if she and Daniel and Mo had been caught sneaking into a movie, stolen candy in their pockets. And with Bowie! Who wasn't even a real person! Real people knew who they were supposed to be, knew their own names and did not have to borrow them. They had their own faces.

Daniel said, "So I was right. We're dead."

Mo said, "Bullshit!" He said it so emphatically spit flew out. He wiped his mouth. "We're here. We're alive!"

Laura thought once again, without knowing why: Susannah! This is all your fault!

She hadn't even made it out of high school, to the good parts. For God's sake, she hadn't even had sex with a girl yet, which meant that as far as she was concerned, she hadn't really had sex at all, unless you were going to count lying on a blanket in the sand dunes while some summer guy with scratchy facial hair and a tattoo of a lobster riding a unicorn with MAGICAL MAINE written underneath it-and no sense of timing-fingered you while he humped your thigh, which Laura did not. Meanwhile, Susannah did whatever she wanted. Susannah kissed people on a regular basis, and now Laura was remembering something that had happened right before they had died, which was Susannah kissing someone during "The Kissing Song." Well, that was what Susannah did during "The Kissing Song." It was the whole gimmick. Except this time Susannah had kissed Rosamel Walker. Which was typical of Susannah. Kissing people you knew you shouldn't kiss, as if that were something you could do and not expect there would be repercussions.

Laura didn't want to be thinking about Susannah. There had been songs that Laura was going to write! She'd had a plan for the next few years. Finish high school. Get a full scholarship at some reasonably good college. On the music side, shitty performances in shitty clubs, followed by better performances at better clubs. Preferably with Daniel and Susannah, but if not, then oh well. There were other musicians in the sea. More songs, more acclaim, more hard work. More life! More!

Finally, if Laura had had any idea she was going to be dead soon, she would have stopped saving up for the Gretsch G5422TG Electromatic Double Cutaway Hollowbody and bought the Epiphone Casino Coupe instead. She'd had enough money for the Epiphone months ago.

"Someone do something," Laura said. She realized she was whispering. So she tried a second time, really projecting this time. It was like being on stage. You just had to make yourself be heard. Even when you were petrified. Even when your audience looked as if they might be planning to eat you alive. Bogomil grinning at her the whole time. "Mr. Anabin! Hello? Hello! Are you just going to let him do this?"

She dragged her eyes away from Bogomil in his borrowed costume, found Mr. Anabin's face again in the window glass.

But then Bowie was speaking. "I don't want to go," he said. "Anabin. We want to stay. We are asking you to help us." He took Mr. Anabin by the shoulder and forcibly spun him. As Mr. Anabin turned, so did Bogomil, so that now Bogomil faced the piano, the blackboard, and the clock upon the wall above.

Mr. Anabin said, as if he had been a part of the conversation all along, "If you wish to stay, then Bogomil and I must come to an agreement. Perhaps a game? Or a set of trials, like the old days. With prizes. Bogomil likes those."

They were all looking now, first to Mr. Anabin and then to where Bogomil stood. Bogomil's shoulder rose, just a little. He sat down on the end of the piano bench beside the blackboard, still facing away, and lifted the lid. So gently! One finger came down on a black key.

Mo said, "Dead or alive, there's no way in hell I'm going anywhere with him. No pun intended."

Daniel said, "Nobody is going anywhere with that guy."

As if we'd have any choice, Laura thought.

"There must be rules," Mr. Anabin said.

A finger on that black key again.

"I'll keep them here," Mr. Anabin said. "You and I to devise the trial. Something educational? Perhaps a series of tests. If they succeed, you will let them go."

They waited, hardly daring to breathe, but the black key did not depress. Instead Bogomil stood up and scraped, leisurely, a fingernail down the blackboard. Laura found she could not lift her hands to cover her ears to block out the sound the whole time Bogomil wrote. Her sides grew wet with sweat where her leaden arms hung down. When Bogomil was done writing, there was a message upon the blackboard in a smear of reddish brown.

2 RETURN

2 REMAIN

"Hold on," Daniel said. "What does that mean?"

But Mr. Anabin was already speaking.

"Done," he said.

Bogomil turned at this and faced them. He was not smiling, but there was something different in his face now. How beautiful he was! He advanced, not speaking, and Mr. Anabin did not speak, either. Bogomil looked at each of them in turn: Daniel, Mo, and then Laura. Laura returned his look, trying to be as brave as possible, or at least to seem so. If she couldn't be brave, then at least she could pretend to be brave. It seemed to her that she looked at Bogomil for a very long time. His beauty only increased, until it became a kind of ache inside her, yet she could see nothing good in him. Only horror. And she knew he could see that she was not brave.

At last he looked at Bowie. But Bowie would not look at Bogomil at all. Instead he stared at the floor.

Bogomil took three steps forward until he stood no more than a foot from Mr. Anabin. Mr. Anabin, like Bowie, would not meet Bogomil's gaze. Bogomil reached out and took Mr. Anabin's face in his dirty hands. He reached up and touched Mr. Anabin's hair. Mr. Anabin smiled. He closed his eyes. "Bogomil," he said, and Bogomil's hand fell. He began to shiver and shake until Laura felt he would fly into pieces, but the next moment he was not there at all. Instead a black rabbit crouched on the floor at Mr. Anabin's feet. Its long ears flicked back and forward; before anyone could move, it dashed between Mr. Anabin and Bowie, zigzagging toward the very back of the classroom, to the door, then between Bowie and Laura, headfirst into the wall below the window. It hit with a bad sound.

Both hind legs were still jerking spasmodically when Mo knelt down beside it, Laura saying, "Oh, be careful, Mo! Be careful!"

But the rabbit's neck was broken. It was dead. Sometimes things keep moving for a little while after they are dead. The Mayor's costume lay in a flattened, dirty heap where Bogomil had stood. The room stank of roses.

The first one to speak was Mo, which wasn't a surprise. His hand was almost always first to go up in class, as if that ever impressed anyone. He and Susannah at a table at What Hast Thou Ground?, sitting and laughing. Look how much fun we're having. Even his trumpet-playing in band had been showy. He said, "What just happened? Right now? Also, what happened before that? And also before that? What exactly is going on?"

They all looked at Mr. Anabin. He said, "A complicated question with a complicated answer."

"We're smart kids," Mo said. He shot Daniel a malevolent look. Now Laura remembered, too: Mo didn't like Daniel for a reason that, according to Daniel, was a complete mystery. Even Susannah said she didn't know. "Well, most of us."

Daniel said, "All I want to know is if I can go home."

"Of course we can go home," Laura said. Before Bogomil had shown up, she'd wanted to know some stuff. She'd had questions. But it was clear that Bogomil was the answer to every single one. Answers were terrible. "We can walk. Daniel, let's go." "You may go home," Mr. Anabin said. "You should go home. But there are one or two things you must understand first."

Laura didn't want to look at Mr. Anabin. Instead she kept her eyes on the dead rabbit.

"Oh," Mo said. "Sure. I mean, if you're sure those things aren't too complicated for us to understand."

"You were dead," Mr. Anabin said. "And, yes, what you are now is complicated. Let us put our attention therefore on the most pressing matter. This game, this contest that Bogomil suggests. There will be three trials. Yes. That should suffice. As long as our game runs, and as long as you adhere to its rules, you will stay in the world of the living."

"What if we don't want to play some game?" Daniel said.

"Then there will be nothing I can do," Mr. Anabin said. "By rights you will belong to Bogomil again and he may dispose of you as he chooses."

"You mean we'll be dead again," Mo said.

Mr. Anabin said nothing.

"What does it mean?" Laura said. "What he wrote on the blackboard? Two return, two remain?"

"Bogomil's math," Mr. Anabin said. "An equation that will take some time to solve. You asked if you could go home. Go home. But you must not tell anyone about any part of this. That is the first rule. Do not break it. I will arrange an explanation for your absence."

"How can we tell anyone anything when we don't know what happened?" Mo said. He went over to the blackboard and picked up the eraser and began to scrub at Bogomil's writing. "Take, for example, our deaths. Was it a car accident? Bubonic plague? Did we enter a fried-clam-eating contest and win a bad prize? Does anyone remember? Why won't this eraser just erase? What's the point of an eraser that doesn't do the only thing it's meant to do?"

He banged the eraser against the board and a cloud of dust flew up.

No one said anything. No one could remember, Laura saw. It seemed to her that perhaps Mr. Anabin did not know, either. "Okay, so table that," Mo said. "I mean, it's not like it's a big deal, how we died. Happens all the time. People die every day getting out of the shower. Checking their email. Making a sandwich. So we died. Who cares how, right? But maybe you can tell us how long we've been ... not alive ...?"

"Where Bowie is concerned, I cannot answer that question," Mr. Anabin said.

They all looked at Bowie, but Bowie appeared to have no opinion or feelings on the subject of how long he had been dead.

"You three," Mr. Anabin said, "died almost a year ago. You died at the start of the year and tomorrow is the fourteenth of December. The year is 2014. When you . . . died, your bodies were not found. There was no trace or explanation of what might have happened. Where you might have gone."

Laura's heart turned over. Mom, she thought. Oh, Mom, poor Mom. Poor Susannah. Poor Mom, stuck with just Susannah.

"A year," Daniel said. His face said he did not believe it.

Mr. Anabin made a gesture with his hand.

"What was that?" Laura said. "You just did something again, didn't you?"

"It's fixed," Mr. Anabin said. "You may go home. There won't be any questions."

"Oh, I have questions," Mo said from the blackboard. "For example, what do you mean 'it's fixed'? What exactly is 'it,' and also, what do you mean when you say 'fixed'? And also, how is 'it' 'fixed'?" You could hear every single quotation mark.

"This year the three of you have been abroad," Mr. Anabin said. "You graduated in the spring after having accepted offers to attend university in Ireland. Full scholarships to a prestigious program at a private conservatory in Ireland."

"Ireland?" Daniel said. "Why Ireland? Did we actually go there? Did we die in Ireland?"

"But I'm a junior," Mo said. "I mean I *was* a junior. When, you know, we died."

"You graduated a year early," Mr. Anabin said. "The scholarship was contingent upon your early graduation. Everyone is very proud of you. The three of you. You returned home yesterday for the winter break. An overnight flight to Boston, where I, as the liaison with your program, picked you up. It's two o'clock in the morning and you are, all of you, in your beds asleep at this very moment. The day that lies ahead is Sunday. Sleep in. On Monday, you will come to this room at two P.M. sharp. I will be waiting."

Laura listened as Mr. Anabin spoke, and some part of her wanted to believe every word. Did believe. She had not been dead. She had graduated! Accepted a scholarship, gone to the DMV, and had passport photos taken. She'd flown from Boston into Dublin, then taken a bus from Dublin to the outskirts of Cork, been picked up by a van from the conservatory. She'd almost left her suitcase on the bus, she'd been so jet-lagged. She'd been homesick, but it had been an amazing experience. She and Daniel and Mo had gone sightseeing. For example, she'd been in a . . . castle? Somewhere dark. Cold. She hadn't been able to get out. The dead rabbit on the floor of the music room said, Remember. Remember death. You were dead. One day you will be dead again.

"What if we don't come to you?" Daniel said.

"I leave it up to you," Mr. Anabin said. "You may come to me. If you do not come to me, then Bogomil will come to you."

While they were thinking about that, he said, "When you come to me, you will tell me what you remember of your death. And here is the first trial. You will accomplish some form of magic. On Monday you will bring me proof."

"Homework!" Laura said. It almost felt normal. "Let's go, let's go. Daniel, *come on*."

"Mo?" Daniel said. "You coming? Bowie? You got somewhere to go?"

Mo lived with his famous grandmother in one of the old Victorian houses on the Cliffs. Way above the rest of the town, where people had the most money and the nicest views and didn't have to worry about king tides or crab migrations or drunk day-trippers in summer wandering out of the dunes and into backyards. Laura had never been inside Mo's house, but once she'd watched an episode where Oprah had actually come to Lovesend, Massachusetts, to interview Mo's grandmother. It was an extremely awesome house. Plus, Mo's grandmother was Mo's grandmother, successful and celebrated and generally amazing. Laura thought, Mo can take care of himself.

And was Bowie supposed to be their problem now, just because he'd come back from the dead with them like a package deal? Buy three dead people, get one free?

Bowie, or whatever his name really was, seemed of a piece with Bogomil and the place they had escaped from. Who knew why he had ended up there? *Death*, she thought, but other people had died—lots of them—and none of those other dead people had hitched a ride back to Lewis Latimer with Laura and Daniel and Mo.

But you couldn't just leave this guy here, in a music room with Mr. Anabin and a grand piano and a dead rabbit. Could you?

Laura said to Bowie, "Ruth would lose her shit if she woke up and there was some strange kid in the house. But you could stay with Daniel, I guess?"

Daniel's family lived next door to the Hands. They'd been neighbors all their lives. What with all of Daniel's brothers and sisters, odds were good his mother and his stepfather would never even notice some strange kid.

"Sure," Daniel said. "I guess."

Bowie said, "I can take care of myself."

"Bowie. What a puzzle you are. Every piece of you a puzzle. Eventually you may remember more of what you were," Mr. Anabin said. "But the world, too, is not as it once was."

Bowie said nothing to this. When he left the room, Laura thought, He doesn't even know where he's going, does he? The thought was so unmooring she bit the inside of her cheek.

Mr. Anabin said, "Mohammed, I'll drive you home. It's a long way for you to walk."

If Laura had been Mo, she wouldn't have accepted. But Mo just hunched his shoulders and nodded.