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THE GREEN KINGDOM



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THE GREEN KINGDOM



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*For the real Caspia and her mother Juliane,
who were our scouts in Brooklyn. - C. F.*





The Lost Summer



The whole summer?

‘Come on Caspia, it’s only for eleven weeks!’ Dad had said.

But what on earth would she do for eleven weeks without her friends, her things, her bed, her EVERYTHING? Especially for the best eleven weeks of the year! No eating ice cream at *The Frozen Lizard*, no swimming in the river, no sleepovers at Ellie’s!

‘You seriously think that’s a bad thing?’ Laryssa laughed when Caspia told her and Ellie where she would be spending the summer. ‘You’ll be in Brooklyn! It’ll be amazing!’

But Caspia wasn’t a city person. She had spent her whole life in Wilmerton, a small town in the north of Maine.

She and Ellie had always made fun of city people, especially tourists from New York, who descended on Wilmerton like locusts as soon as the leaves changed color and said things like: ‘Oh look! How authentic!’

Bad luck! That’s what it was. Infuriating, summer-devouring bad luck.

‘Here!’ said Ellie and slid a bracelet onto her wrist, as they sat by the river together. ‘My cousin brought it back from India. I think it’s some sort of dried vine. It’s meant to protect you from all sorts of things AND bring you good luck.’

Caspia wasn’t sure that a bracelet could protect its wearer, or bring good luck, but she promised to wear it anyway.

In the meantime, Dad was annoyingly excited about the fact that he’d be working on a construction site in New York for the summer. ‘We’ll be working on the tenth floor. Just imagine that! And I’ll be able to see Jamaica Bay from the scaffolding!’

Caspia thought that sounded terribly dangerous, but Dad grinned like a little boy.

Mom was also excited. ‘This will be the perfect time to finally work on my cookbook,’ she said as they were packing their suitcases.

Mom had been wanting to write a cookbook since Caspia

first started school. But she decided to keep that observation to herself. Her grandmother was already making fun of the idea. Six years ago, they had moved into her grandparents' house, which was huge and had a big backyard. But it also came with some major disadvantages. Caspia loved her mother's cooking, even though she sometimes took the experimenting a little too far. And she thought it was a shame that nothing had come of the cookbook yet.

'I signed up for eleven different cooking classes!' Mom announced as she climbed on top of her suitcase to force it shut. 'In Wilmerton even Chinese food is considered an extravagance! But listen to this: *Authentic cuisine of Bali*,' she read out loud, looking at her cell phone's screen. '*The secrets of south Indian cuisine, Ukrainian bean dishes*. I could hardly decide! Aren't you at least a little bit excited, sweetheart?'

No, she wasn't! She wouldn't have minded having to make do without *The Frozen Lizard* and her friends for a while if they were going on some adventurous journey instead. To Madagascar for example, where Caspia had been wanting to go since she first saw a documentary about lemurs! She had suggested this to her parents many times already. Going on a big summer trip, a family adventure so to speak. And what were they doing instead? Brooklyn!

It was a long drive, but Caspia barely said a word.

‘Brooklyn isn’t like Manhattan, Caspia,’ Mom had reassured her at least half a dozen times. ‘Brooklyn is much nicer and quieter.’

Quieter! The street where Dad had rented an Airbnb was swarming with people and cars. The building where their apartment was looked rather old and the elevator was broken, so that they had to drag their suitcases up five whole flights of stairs. And just because Dad’s clumsy friend had dropped a bunch of bricks on his own foot and now needed help on the construction site! Yes, the whole thing was definitely absolutely appallingly bad luck, Caspia thought, as she pushed Ellie’s bracelet under her sleeve and dragged her suitcase up the next step.

‘Here we are!’ said Dad, when he finally used the bent key that the apartment’s owner had sent him, to unlock the apartment door. ‘It’s nice, isn’t it?’

Caspia exchanged a quick look with Mom. Flowered wallpaper! Pillows with flowers. Even the rugs had floral patterns on them. The whole apartment looked like the house of Laryssa’s grandmother, who was always proudly telling everyone that she used to be a hippie in her day. Meaning: a hundred years ago.

‘The woman who rents out the apartment hasn’t had a chance to renovate it yet since her mother passed,’ Dad

explained when he saw their faces. ‘That’s why it’s a bit old-fashioned.’

‘She died?’ Caspia threw him a horrified look. ‘But not here, right?’

‘We got lucky to find anything at all on such short notice, Caspia!’ Dad replied. ‘Okay, it has a bit of a Mary Poppins feel to it. But it could be worse!’

More like *Little House on the Prairie*, Caspia thought. In Brooklyn.

‘The kitchen is great,’ said Mom. ‘And we can just put away some of the pillows. We’ll be fine!’

That evening she announced how much she loved the grocery stores in the area, and Dad raved about all the cool buildings he’d already seen, and how much more exciting it would be to work on a construction site in New York, instead of Wilmerton where there were no houses with more than two stories.

How could the two of them be such traitors?

Three months. Away from everything she knew . . .

The first night was bad. Dad had neglected to make sure that their apartment had air conditioning, and her room was so hot that Caspia opened the window, just to realize that outside was the exact same temperature. And besides, so much noise was drifting up from the street below that she

couldn't sleep anyway and eventually gave up on it entirely.

There was only one spot in her room where the internet worked properly – on the windowsill. So, she crouched down on it and texted Laryssa and Ellie, hoping they were still up. After all it was only 930pm on a Friday night. But the two of them were either asleep already or out. Laryssa often spent the weekends with her cousins and Ellie spent hers with the Wilmerton Greenlings – who Caspia's grandmother considered to be communists ever since they organized a protest against the new shopping mall that was supposed to be built on the green next to the river.

When she didn't get a response, Caspia set her phone aside. Three months! She closed her fingers around the small ceramic fish that she wore on a string around her neck. Laryssa and Ellie had the same one. They had bought them in a shop in Wilmerton, to celebrate that they had been friends for seven years. That was more than half their lives. Three months! Should she make a calendar where she could cross off the days? No, that would only remind her how many were left. Maybe she should leave her things in her bag, so it felt more like they were about to go home again soon. She sighed once more and looked over at her suitcase. *No, Caspia, she told herself. Unless you want to be the smalltown girl from Maine walking around Brooklyn in crumpled T-shirts.*

She could only hope that people here would not be as mean to her as she and Ellie were to tourists from New York . . .

Underneath the window was a large, old dresser. Maybe she should put her things in there. It was actually pretty nice. Of course it was also covered in flowers. But these looked as if someone had painted them on themselves, someone who had tried to depict real flowers, even though Caspia had no idea which ones. She had never paid much attention to plants, except for the poison ivy that grew by the river.



She ran her fingers over the painted flowers and leaves. She could feel brushstrokes. Yes, somebody really had painted them by hand.

The top drawer required a strong jolt to open. But she was used to that from her grandmother's old dresser. Surprise! The drawer was lined with faded floral paper. Caspia covered it with her T-shirts and underwear. In the second one she found room for her jeans, socks, and all of the sweaters she had brought because she was used to cool Maine weather. Would it stay this warm? How did people accomplish anything in this heat?

The bottom drawer was even more stuck than the others, and Caspia was just about to give up, when it finally budged. That hadn't been easy. A bundle of letters was sitting on the floral paper – as if it had been unwedged from behind the drawer when she opened it.

Letters . . . Which seemed as old-fashioned as the wallpaper. One of her great aunts still sent birthday cards in envelopes. But Caspia couldn't think of any other letter she had ever opened or even held in her hands.

The envelopes were long and narrow and made from pale-green linen paper. Someone had tied them together with a green velvet ribbon and carefully placed a dried flower underneath the bow. It was violet blue.

Caspia took the bundle from the drawer. It looked as if the letters had been very important to someone. Maybe the old lady who had lived here. It would probably be best to tell the woman renting out the apartment about them. But the letters looked so inviting. As if they were whispering: *Caspia, come on. Read us! We've been waiting for you.*



Were they love letters? In movies they usually were.

Caspia took a picture to send to Ellie and Laryssa.

The violet flower fell into her lap when she untied the ribbon, and the envelopes felt as if they could hardly wait to reveal the words that were hidden inside. There were ten letters, and they had all been opened before. The handwriting on the envelopes was swirly and old-fashioned. Caspia could barely decipher it.

The recipient was always the same.

Minna Reynolds
2101 Beekman Place #5c
Brooklyn, NY
USA

That was the address of their apartment. But the address of the sender was different on each letter. Caspia did not even know where some of the places were, but she knew the countries: China, Egypt, Scotland . . . Yes, the letters came from all over, but only one person had sent them.

Rosalind Reynolds.

Caspia hesitated and ran her fingers over the first envelope. What harm could it really do if she read one of the letters? Dad could still give them to the owner afterwards.

She opened the first envelope and pulled out the letter, which had been carefully folded to fit inside perfectly. The paper was the same pale-green as the envelope, and the handwriting on it was also the same.

Dear Sister,

Here is my first riddle! So we can travel together even though you are so far away. As promised, the plants

that you will have to guess will not be very rare nor unknown to you. Also, each one will have a connection to the human world.

Can you imagine, Minna, Papa and I are quite the celebrities by now! The British botanist and his blind daughter, who travel the world together, to explore the Green Kingdom. I make all the gardeners rather nervous when I touch their plants with my fingers to get to know them! But I think the plants like it! So . . . as agreed, here are your five clues that will help you guess the answer.

Caspia stared down at the letter in her hand, while the night outside was still filled with voices and car noise. There was a date in the top right corner: March 27, 1958. Her Mom had not even been born then. But the words on the pale-green paper . . . they were so alive. They sounded as if someone had reached for her hand.

‘Hi, Rosalind!’ she said quietly. ‘It’s a pleasure to meet you.’

No, she would not return these letters. Not yet.

Rosalind's First Letter

March 27, 1958

Dear Sister,

Here is my first riddle! So we can travel together even though you are so far away. As promised, the plants that you will have to guess will not be very rare nor unknown to you. Also, each one will have a connection to the human world.

Can you imagine, Minna, Papa and I are quite the celebrities by now! The British botanist and his blind daughter, who travel the world together, to explore the Green Kingdom. I make all the gardeners rather nervous when I touch their plants with my fingers to get to know them! But I think the plants like it! So . . . as agreed, here are your five clues that will help you guess the answer.

1. *Humans have been stealing the skin of this tree for thousands of years.*

2. *It is home to the purple-faced langur monkey and 45 different species of lizard.*

3. *It serves cooks and bakers alike - and cures a fever!*

4. *This is my favorite clue: this tree is said to be guarded by venomous flying serpents!*

'Rosalind!' I hear you sigh. 'This is too difficult. There are more than 73,000 tree species on this planet!'

All right. Here is one last clue:

5. *It is hot and humid where Papa and I are at the moment! This tree does not like the cold at all.*

So . . . Which citizen of the Green Kingdom is it?

*I suggest that you take that embroidery needle,
Minna, and the thread with which you have enchanted
my fingers so many times before. Embroider a portrait
of the plant described in my riddle and send it to me!
If it feels familiar to my hands, I will send you the
next riddle.*

But for now, I am sending you a fierce hug!

*From your little sister,
Rosalind*

*PS: Papa has kindly agreed to write out these
letters for me as I dictate them. I am sure you have
recognized his handwriting already. So he will be a
part of our game as well, which I thought you
would like.*