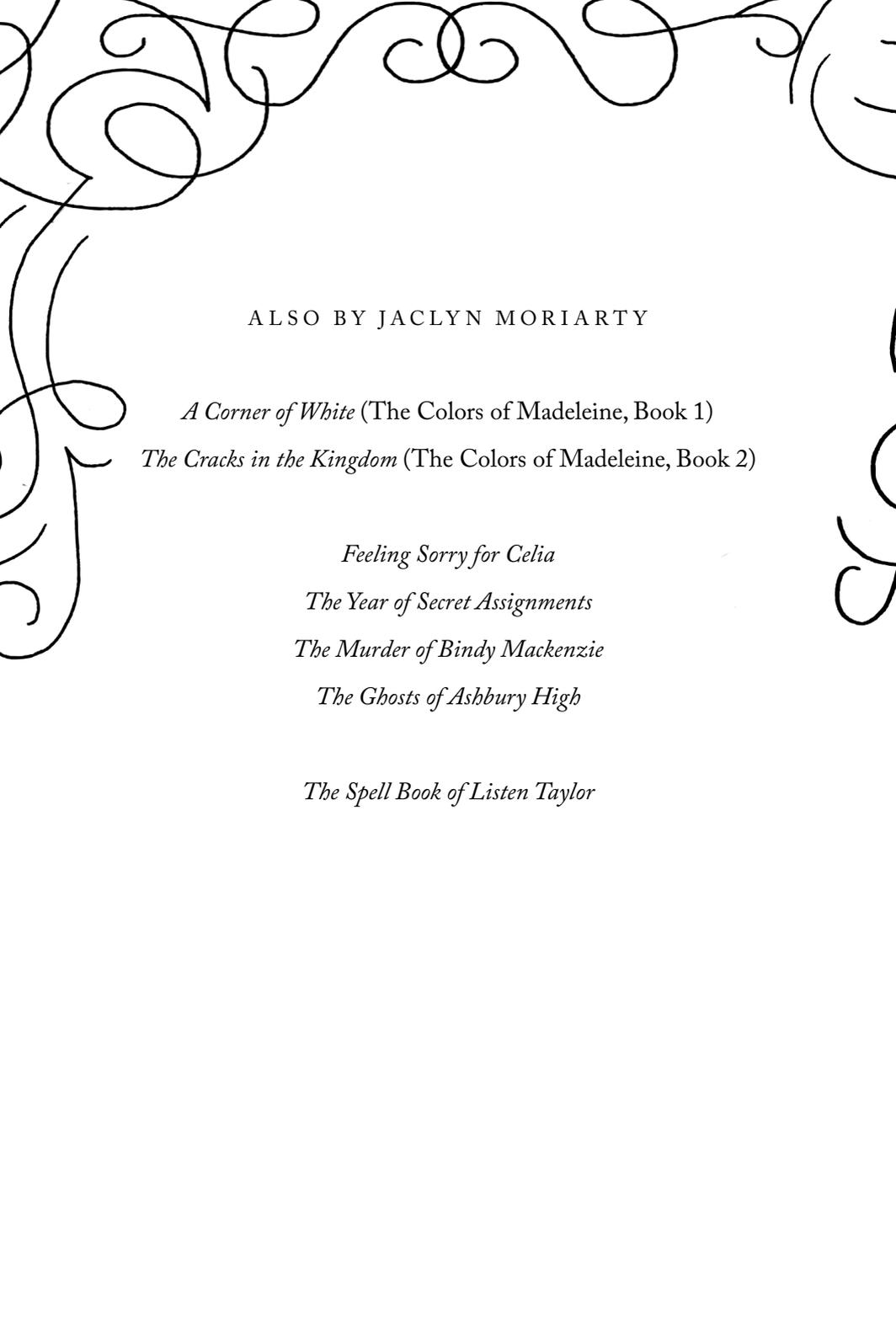


A
Tangle of Gold





ALSO BY JACLYN MORIARTY

A Corner of White (The Colors of Madeleine, Book 1)

The Cracks in the Kingdom (The Colors of Madeleine, Book 2)

Feeling Sorry for Celia

The Year of Secret Assignments

The Murder of Bindy Mackenzie

The Ghosts of Ashbury High

The Spell Book of Listen Taylor



A
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of Gold

THE COLORS OF MADELEINE
BOOK THREE

JACLYN MORIARTY



ARTHUR A. LEVINE BOOKS
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From *Queries* to *The Opticks*, by Isaac Newton (1721):

Eggs grow . . . & change into animals, Tad-poles into Frogs & worms into Flyes. All Birds Beasts & Fishes Insects Trees & other Vegetables, with their several parts, grow out of water . . . And among such various & strange transmutations why may not Nature change bodies into light & light into bodies?

From *Queries* to *The Opticks*, by Isaac Newton (1721):

For some colours are agreeable as those of Gold & Indigo, & others disagree.

From *Letter of Mr. Isaac Newton, Containing His New Theory about Light and Colours* (*Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, number 80, 1671–2):

[B]ut if any one [colour] predominate, the light must incline to that colour; as it happens in the blue flame of brimstone; the yellow flame of a candle; and the various colours of the fixed stars. . . .

From *The Prelude*, Book 3, by William Wordsworth
(1799–1805, published 1850):

*And from my pillow, looking forth by light
Of moon or favouring stars, I could behold
The antechapel where the statue stood
Of Newton with his prism and silent face,
The marble index of a mind for ever
Voyaging through strange seas of Thought, alone.*

From *The Kingdom of Cello: An Illustrated Travel Guide*, by T. I. Candle, 7th edition, © 2012, reprinted with kind permission, Brellidge University Press, T. I. Candle:

The Cello Winds

The Winds of Cello are a hoot. I mean that literally. Sometimes they sound exactly like a cross between a car horn and an owl. No, it's more like a car horn and an owl engaged in chat:

Toot hoot.

Hoot toot?

Toot.

Ho-o-t?!

Then, just when you're not expecting it — just when you're sniggering and turning to your books — the Cello Winds switch. Something surges forward like a sailboat on a wave; springs at your heart with claws of gold. The Wind finds its feet — or its wings, or its voice — and the music that it sounds! How to describe it? *Exquisite* does not even come close!

Try this. I have a friend (Albert) who once suggested that the music of the Winds is “*that elusive thing that lies beyond all beauty; the aesthetic heart and soul of grief and love.*” I'll be honest, I often find Albert quite insufferable, but here, somehow, he almost hits the mark.

Of course, the Cello Winds do more than play their music:¹ They also blow away disease. In our Kingdom, no pestilence takes hold.

No doubt you'll arrive in Cello determined to hear the Wind. Your determination counts for nothing. Indeed, you could spend a lifetime in Cello and never hear it once. (On the other hand, I am acquainted with a woman [Sophia] who has only ever *been* to Cello once — and that, very briefly, in transit — yet for the entire fifteen minutes she was regaled by the Winds. So. You know. Go figure.)

¹ In the seventeenth century, instrument makers in Bologna, Italy, the World, modified the bass violin to create a large, stringed musical instrument. Someone who had once visited Cello observed that the instrument's melancholy tone resembled the Cello Winds. Hence, the instrument was named the *violoncello*. These days, it is simply known as “the cello.”

A Tangle of Gold



PART 1

1.

When Elliot Baranski came to Cambridge, England, he only stayed for just over two weeks.

Which was preposterous.

He was from the Kingdom of Cello, he had stumbled into the World when he fell into a ravine and landed in a BP petrol station, he'd walked from this petrol station to Cambridge so as to find his friend Madeleine Tully, but, unexpectedly — a real bonus — the first person he'd run into was Abel Baranski, who was only Elliot's long-lost dad.

All of which was perfectly reasonable.

Brilliant, even.

But this! Leaving after just over two weeks!

Well, it was preposterous. It was so preposterous it was making Madeleine's nose bleed.

Madeleine was standing on the platform at the Cambridge railway station with a bleeding nose. Around her, the others were talking about flight times, and how Abel and Elliot felt about turbulence, and whether Abel had remembered to drop off the key to his flat, and where the dog, Sulky-Anne, would live now, and whether her new

owners had been informed about Sulky-Anne's fear of marshmallows. And so on.

Abel was taking each of the questions in mild, thoughtful turn. Elliot, meanwhile, was standing apart, watching the tracks.

That was Elliot Baranski in his overcoat and his woollen hat. That was Elliot's bare hands and wrists. That was Elliot kicking a suitcase lightly with the toe of his boot.

He glanced towards Madeleine. She caught his glance and held it, trying to convey a lot of things — well, primarily one thing: *This is preposterous!* — in her expression. But Elliot scratched at the edge of his wool hat and turned away again. She hadn't conveyed anything. The blood-soaked tissues pressed against her face had probably interfered.

Madeleine ran through the events of the past just-over-two-weeks. Fiercely, she counted them. There were eight.

First, Abel held a party to introduce his long-lost son to everyone.

Everyone consisted of Madeleine's friends, Belle and Jack, and their assortment of home-schooling teachers: Madeleine's mother, Belle's mother, Jack's grandfather, and Darshana Charan, who taught them Science and Mathematics in exchange for the babysitting of her daughters. Abel himself was their ICT and Geography teacher. He lived in the flat downstairs from Madeleine and her mother.

Madeleine came down early, to help tidy, but Belle and Jack turned up while the place was still a mess.

"So, this is Elliot?" Belle said.

"It is," Elliot himself agreed.

"From the parking meter."

"From the Kingdom of Cello," Madeleine corrected her. "We just wrote to each other through a crack inside the parking meter. Remember, I told you —"

“Shut it. I’m trying to appraise him.”

There was a pause while Belle stared at Elliot.

“He’s hot,” she concluded, turning to Madeleine. “Respect.” She offered Madeleine a fist bump, which was not Belle’s style. It might have been ironic.

“Nice aura too,” Belle tossed back at Elliot as she moved into the flat, looking for food.

“Well, thanks,” Elliot said.

Jack said, “Hiya!” and asked Elliot if he’d ever visited Cambridge before.

“You tosser,” Belle said from the kitchenette. “He’s from another *dimension*.”

Jack shrugged. “In a former life, then? Have you got memories of your former lives, Elliot? And did you ever, in a former life, live in our dimension and visit Cambridge?”

Elliot was still considering this when the others arrived — everyone was early, wanting to meet the long-lost son — and things became a chaos of pouring drinks, opening biscuits, pulling trays of chocolate-pecan brownies from the oven, clearing spaces on Abel’s workbenches, tripping over the dog, and trying to prevent Darshana Charan’s little girls from electrocuting themselves. Someone switched on some music, but Abel reached out and turned it off.

“Hang on,” he said. “I have to make my speech.”

He had already decided not to mention the Kingdom of Cello. It was true that Belle and Jack knew about Cello, but if he tried to explain it to the adults, it would only end in —

“Tears,” Madeleine offered.

“Scepticism,” Abel said. “And if there’s one thing I can’t abide, it’s scepticism.”

So, instead, he announced to the room that he’d been suffering

amnesia the whole time he'd known them (which was true), and that his name was *not* Denny, as he'd thought, but Abel Baranski, and that here was his lost son, Elliot, all the way from the U.S. of A.

"Stand up, Elliot," he said, "so they can see you."

"No need," somebody pointed out. "He'll be the only stranger in the room. There. That one."

"Ah, he's proud of his son," another voice put in indulgently, and Elliot obliged them by standing so everyone could continue smiling at him.

"Our plan is to see if we can figure out how to get ourselves back home to the U.S. of A.," Abel continued.

"You could buy plane tickets," someone suggested. "That'd be your best bet."

Abel switched the music on again, and it turned into a party.

Elliot was friendly and shook people's hands and smiled at their jokes, but he didn't say much. Once, he turned towards the sound of Belle's mother, who was making fun of Belle's earrings, reaching out to touch them and pretending they sizzled, which made no sense. His face was carefully blank as he watched this, but Madeleine caught the tiny crease of a frown, just above his eye. He turned away again. Another time, she saw him look down and find Darshana's little girls crouched by his feet.

"You've got a scab here on your ankle," the girls told him. "We're just picking it off for you."

He laughed and crouched down to chat with them, shifting his ankle away from their fingers as he did. But Madeleine didn't hear what they said.

Next, Madeleine, Belle, and Jack showed Elliot around Cambridge.

This was the day after the party. Jack had drawn up an itinerary

and he led the tour, reciting a lot of historical facts, most of which he invented. Elliot listened, gazing at the architecture. He shook his head in slow admiration sometimes, which made Jack happy.

They went punting on the Cam that day, and Elliot asked if he could try steering. He stood up on the slippery platform and followed their instructions: You lift the pole out of the water, raise it hand over hand, then let it fall down to the riverbed. At first, Elliot concentrated hard, but then a calm fell over him and you could see it become part of his body, the action of the pole rising and falling, and everything about him seemed to move quietly and smoothly, and he disappeared in thought. Madeleine watched him while the punt moved with its *plash*, quiet, *plash*. There weren't many people on the river, but Elliot nodded, friendly, every time they passed another punt. He never once got the pole caught on a snag.

Third, they invited Elliot to play tennis with them.

Elliot watched them warm up. "I've played a game something like this before," he said, half to himself.

Then he stepped onto the court and returned Belle's shot with a beautiful, swift, unexpected backhand. He laughed when he heard the scoring — "forty-love," "deuce" — then he stopped laughing and figured out how it worked.

He often went quiet, Madeleine noticed, figuring things out. He seemed laid-back, easy-going-farm-boy — like he should be chewing on a piece of straw — but if you looked close, you'd see flickering frowns, and you knew he was studying things from all sorts of angles, trying to piece it all together.

Fourth, most nights, Madeleine went downstairs to Abel's flat and hung out with Abel and Elliot, drinking cocoa, eating muffins, and talking

about how to get them home. Abel was spending his days reading quantum physics, writing copious notes, and studying the parking meter. He liked to talk things through with Madeleine, and to quiz her about the experiments she and Elliot had done when the two of them had tried to solve the crack.

“Electricity and magnetism jostled it,” Madeleine said, “but we think a mirror and a light is the best.” She glanced over at Elliot. “Right?”

Elliot nodded.

“Only, the crack in the parking meter here is too small for people, so we never actually got it open. You need a *bigger* crack, a people-moving crack, and then we think a mirror and light will work — but we don’t know for sure.” Again, she looked at Elliot.

“Right,” Elliot agreed, but said no more.

Some nights, Madeleine’s mother, Holly, joined them too. She was doing a fashion design course by correspondence, and she’d bring down the samples she was sewing and work on zips or buttons while they talked. She thought their conversation about the Kingdom of Cello was a game or a story they’d invented.

“This is better than TV!” she said. Then she reflected, “Well, in all honesty, it’s not. TV’s great these days. Such high production values. But still. This isn’t bad!”

Fifth, everyone decided that Elliot may as well join in their home schooling while he was here.

So he came along to a History class with Jack’s grandfather, Federico Cagnetti.

The class was in an office above the porter’s lodge at Trinity. Federico was crouching by the fireplace, warming his hands, when

they arrived. His hands were long and craggy, with sprouts of white hair on the knuckles, and these hairs glowed in the gaslight.

Elliot sat beside Madeleine.

“It is the turn of Belle,” Federico said abruptly, pressing his hands onto his thighs to raise himself and scowling around, light from the gas fire eerie in his eyes. “Lucky for Belle.”

Madeleine was conscious of Elliot’s profile. His shadow was blending with the shadow of his chair. His legs in their jeans stretched themselves out, then changed their mind, and moved back closer to the chair legs. One shoelace was tied in a knotty double bow; the other had come loose and was trailing on the floor. His hand reached up and touched a long, fine scar that ran down the side of his neck.

“In this class,” Federico said to Elliot, “we have the hat. Also, welcome,” he added, remembering himself with a sudden blink.

“The hat?”

Federico’s eyes widened. The new kid was an idiot! “The *hat*,” he repeated, and he gestured towards his own bowler hat, sitting face up on the desk.

“Ah.”

Federico relaxed. He held the hat towards Belle.

“He puts historical names in here,” Belle explained, “and then we choose from it and we have to do a presentation on the name. So it’s like his hat is destiny.”

“That’s true,” Jack agreed, interested. “The papers in the hat are like tea leaves or coffee grinds, only the future they predict is assignment-specific.”

Federico began muttering to himself, low and fast, in Italian.

“He’s cursing us,” Jack translated for the others. “That’s wasteful, Nonno. You should save those insults for when we spray-paint gang

symbols all over the office. This is more your general-chitchat-among-students-while-teacher's-hand-gets-tired-holding-out-a-hat situation."

"Just put on an ironic voice," Madeleine suggested. "And say: *Fascinating, people, but let's move on.*"

Federico's muttering rose and accelerated until he sounded like factory machinery with a wrench loose in its workings.

"All right, all right," Belle said. "Keep your hat on."

Then she laughed so hard at her own joke that she almost knocked the hat out of Federico's hand. The others laughed too.

Belle breathed in the last of her laughter, tears in her eyes, and finally reached into the hat. She rustled papers for a while, still smiling to herself, and withdrew a folded slip. She opened it.

"Leonardo da Vinci."

Federico beamed. "*Leonardo da Vinci,*" he repeated with relish.

"He was the blue ninja turtle," Jack said.

"That's all right, then," Belle said. "I look good in blue." She spoke to Elliot again. "We have to *become* the people we do the projects on. One time, Jack got the poet Byron and Madeleine got Isaac Newton, and they both became obsessed. Are you still obsessed?"

Jack began to recite at once:

*"Did ye not hear it? — No; 'twas but the wind,
Or the car rattling o'er the stony street;
On with the dance! let joy be unconfined."*

He paused. "That's just a few lines. I can do the whole thing if you like."

"I read about Isaac Newton every day," Madeleine put in. "Did you know he was an alchemist? They say maybe the mercury sent him mad."

“So, yep, they are still obsessed. I don’t get like that because I have a more reasonable turn of mind.” Belle looked back at Federico. “So you want me to become Leonardo da Vinci?”

“To become him? This is impossible!”

Belle raised a shrewd eyebrow. “Now you’re being inconsistent, cause it was impossible for Madeleine to become Isaac Newton, and yet she did. Or anyway she didn’t. She’s still Madeleine.”

Federico nodded slowly.

“Ha,” Belle said. “I get you. Touché, and that. Or maybe that slow nod is more confusion than you being wise. Either way, I *could* become Leonardo if it’s helpful to you, Federico. Everyone knows that if you believe something strongly enough, it comes true. Like, I once knew a guy who saw a billboard with a picture of peanuts on it and he went into anaphylactic shock.”

“Who was this?” Jack asked.

“Because he was allergic to peanuts.”

“Who?”

“It was an ad for a financial institution or something. *You can buy a house with peanuts*, it said. Or you can’t. Either way, that’s why the picture.”

“You don’t know anyone that happened to at all,” Jack decided.

“Nah,” Belle agreed. “I don’t. But imagine.”

“You can’t believe a word she says,” Jack told Elliot. “Although she’s actually completely honest.”

“It is the time for me to sleep,” Federico announced. “As you are speaking more nonsense than the people I meet in my dreams. So! I will visit my dream friends instead.”

He folded his arms, closed his eyes, and bowed his head.

There was a thoughtful pause.

“That’s quite good, Nonno,” Jack said eventually. “You’ve got our attention. But open your eyes soon or we’ll lose interest and entertain ourselves again.”

Federico grimaced, eyes still closed. He pressed his chin into his chest.

They waited. The fireplace hissed. Federico’s breathing slowed.

“He really is asleep,” Belle whispered.

Federico’s shoulders rose and fell comfortably, in time with his breathing.

“So this is home schooling,” Elliot said.

The others laughed.

“You can’t believe a word *he* says,” Belle said abruptly, pointing at Elliot. “Talking about believing.”

The others looked from Belle to Elliot, who seemed surprised but not offended.

“It’s not so much you can’t believe him,” Belle clarified. “It’s more *he* doesn’t believe what he’s saying. You don’t even have to look at his aura, you can hear it in his voice. He’s play-acting. He doesn’t believe that the Kingdom of Cello exists, let alone that that’s where he’s from.”

Elliot smiled in a pleasant, neutral way.

Jack raised an eyebrow. “You’re right.”

Sixth, that very night, at their regular nighttime meeting, Abel announced that he had news.

His voice made Holly pause in her sewing. Madeleine bit her finger instead of the muffin she was eating.

“I was at the parking meter today,” Abel continued. There was a faint wheeze behind his words, which seemed like an effect, designed to heighten tension. “And a *note was there from Cello.*”

“Oh, nice!” Holly resumed sewing.

Madeleine looked across at Elliot, but he was leaning over, scratching Sulky-Anne's head.

"Here's what the note says." Abel's hands trembled. He read.

This is a message for Madeleine Tully. Are Abel and Elliot Baranski there with you? If so, we want to bring them back to Cello. Meet us here Monday, midnight, to discuss. Keira

"Who's Keira?" Holly said. "New character?"

Madeleine reached for a paper and pen. She angled the paper towards her mother and drew three circles.

"Okay," she said, writing in each circle. "Here are the three most powerful organisations in Cello. The royal family. The Hostiles. And the WSU."

"Oh, *I see*," said Holly.

"No, you don't. You don't even know what I'm talking about." She pointed to the circles in turn. "The royal family are in charge. The Hostiles want to take them down. The WSU is the World Severance Unit, and its job is to stop any contact between Cello and our world." She looked over at Abel and Elliot. "Is this right so far?"

Elliot walked into the kitchen and opened a can of dog food for Sulky-Anne.

Abel nodded. "Perfect. Carry on."

"Abel was on the royal side. The Hostiles chased him over a ravine and he fell through a crack into our world."

"Lucky," Holly said.

"So that's how Abel ended up here. He lost his memory and thought his name was Denny. Meanwhile, back in Cello, the Hostiles kidnapped the royal family and sent *them* through to our world, where they also forgot who they were."

“Huh.”

“But one princess was left behind. Princess Ko. She ran the Kingdom secretly, without telling anybody her family was gone, and she formed a Royal Youth Alliance to help her bring them back. Elliot was part of the Alliance. He worked with me, talking through the parking meter, to try to find the royals and solve the cracks and send the royals home.”

“So you had a big responsibility, Madeleine,” Holly said. “I’m proud.”

“Thank you. But talking to me was risky for Elliot because it’s illegal. The WSU found out, chased *him* over the same ravine, and he also fell through a crack into our world.”

“Symmetrical!” Holly said. “Or too much of a coincidence?”

“Anyhow, there were three other teenagers also on the Royal Youth Alliance with Elliot. Their names were Sergio, Samuel, and Keira.”

There was a pause. Holly was threading a needle. Madeleine waited.

Holly looked up. “*Keira!* The one who wrote the note we just heard! The new character! Great. I’d forgotten we were trying to place her. Thank you, Madeleine.”

“You’re welcome,” Madeleine said. She looked at Abel. “I don’t know much about Keira, except what Elliot told me.”

Elliot was now at the sink, refilling Sulky-Anne’s water bowl, his back to them.

“I think she was from Jagged Edge,” Madeleine continued slowly. “That’s a sort of high-tech province in Cello,” she explained to her mother. “And I think she had some connection to the Hostiles. Her mother was a Hostile? So. Do we trust her?”

Abel studied Keira’s note again, then looked at Madeleine’s diagram.

“You’ve got the three most powerful organisations in Cello,” he said. “But you’re missing a fourth. Each province has its own council. Mostly, they’re just for show, but in Jagged Edge, the provincial council is controlled by a group called the Elite. And a lot of people think they actually run everything — the whole Kingdom, I mean. They’ve got links to the criminal underworld, which helps.”

“Oh, then, for *sure* they’re the most powerful,” Holly put in. “Crime lords always control everything, because they’ve got lawlessness and tattooed thugs and sinister men in hats and shadows with scars — they’ve got all that on their side. So if you’re saying that this Keira girl is from the Jagged Edge place, *and* has Hostile connections, well, I wouldn’t trust her to pick up the milk, let alone to bring you home to Cello.”

“She’s also beautiful,” Madeleine reflected. “I remember Elliot telling me that.”

“That settles it, then. Never trust the pretty ones. Well, I’m tired. Shall we go up to bed, Mads?”

“Uh,” said Madeleine. “I have to go with Abel to the parking meter? It’s Monday today. We should go hear what this Keira has to say.”

“Wow.” Holly stood. “You’re really *invested* in this thing, aren’t you? I guess, as long as you stay warm and don’t get chased over any ravines.” She took an extra muffin, “for the road,” and she headed upstairs.

Seventh, Madeleine and Abel put on their coats, ready to go talk to Keira at the parking meter.

Elliot said he was “beat” and he’d turn in.

“Let me know what goes down,” he said, grinning, and Madeleine smiled back, and stepped through the door after Abel.

She remembered her umbrella. She swung back around. Elliot startled, seeing her, and he grabbed at his grin again. But it was too late. She'd caught the expression on his face. It reminded her of those selfies older women post of themselves sometimes without makeup: You'd get accustomed to seeing them all shiny and glossy, and then wham! Here was the truth. A ravaged, exhausted, colourless old face. Elliot's expression was that, but also more: It was utter despair.

"You coming, Mads?" Abel called to her from the staircase.

Elliot held her gaze and his careful smile.

Madeleine closed the door and followed Abel.

And finally, eighth, she and Abel arrived at the parking meter.

The mist hunched along the road as if the air itself was huddling, cold.

Abel was wheezing. He shouldn't be out on a winter night with that chest of his. She could see he was forcing himself to slow his breathing.

She was holding a notepad and pen. Staring at a parking meter. In an empty laneway.

It was exactly like the nights she used to come here to talk to Elliot, except that Elliot was now in a flat ten minutes from here and Elliot's father was beside her.

Also, she was going to speak to a beautiful stranger named Keira.

"It's exactly midnight," Abel said, shining the torch onto his watch and then onto the parking meter.

A slip of white appeared along the crack.

"Punctual," he said.

Madeleine pulled out the paper, and Abel leaned close and read with her.

This is Keira. Are you there, Madeleine?

Abel breathed in with a sharp rasp. Madeleine wrote a single word.

Yep.

Are you in contact with Abel and Elliot Baranski?

Yes. Abel's right beside me. Elliot's home in bed.

There was a long pause, then another note appeared.

So Abel and Elliot are alive?

Well, Abel's right beside me like I said. I'd have mentioned if he was a corpse. I can't swear that Elliot's still alive cause I guess a pirate could've broken in and cut his throat in the last ten minutes. Still. That seems doubtful.

There was another break, then another note from Keira:

Okay, here's the deal. The nearest people-moving crack to you is in a city called Berlin, Germany. Based on the maps I have, it looks a reasonable journey for Abel and Elliot to take. Do you know it? If not, I can give you the coordinates. If I give you the precise location of the crack in Berlin, can you direct Abel and Elliot Baranski to be there on Wednesday night? And we'll bring them across.

The torchlight wavered. Madeleine looked up, but Abel's face was in shadow. She wrote a reply.

Who is "we"? Are Princess Ko and the Royal Youth Alliance organising this?

No. It's me, Keira, and also Elliot's mother, and a bunch of Elliot's friends, plus the local Sheriff and Deputy, plus two secret agent guys. Can you get the Baranskis to Berlin?

Yeah, it's not too far. And I already know exactly where that people-moving crack is – I'm the one who worked with Elliot trying to get the royals back to Cello, remember? But I didn't know if it was sealed now or not. And I never knew if the mirror-light thing worked. So did it? And is it safe? Are the royals safe home?

As she sent this reply, she brushed her hand against the parking meter. It was cold like a shot of flame.

Keira's note was brief.

I can unseal the crack. Light-mirror trick does work. We got the King and younger prince home to Cello using it.

Madeleine frowned. Beside her, Abel was trying to hold the torch-light under his chin while he reached into his pocket for his inhaler. She wrote:

Only the King and the little prince? What about the rest of the royal family?

The W&U found out what was happening. They put guards on the other cracks and sealed them, so we had to quit.

“Ask her what time we need to be in Berlin,” Abel said, but Madeleine was already writing.

Are you saying that if the other royals went to the places I told them to go, at the times I told them to, they'd still be waiting now???

Sure. If they're morons. That was weeks ago. Can you confirm you can get Abel and Elliot Baravski to Berlin by Wednesday night?

“Tell her you can,” Abel said. “But ask what time. And ask if the crack’s being guarded on their side.”

Madeleine was writing fast, but another note from Keira was emerging. Abel grabbed it and read it to himself.

“She’s already answered my questions. She says the guards are still there, but they’re arranging a diversion for midnight while we come through. She says timing is vital.”

“Does she?” Madeleine said. “And does she even know there’s a time difference between here and Germany?”

She folded her own reply while Abel was still trying to read her handwriting over her shoulder:

This is too dangerous. The last time Elliot was in Cello, the W54 chased him over a cliff – if there hadn't been a crack thru to the World he'd be dead. You're going to "divert" the guards? You screw up the timing and Elliot's dead. And even if you get him thru safe, how's he going to STAY safe? They'll hunt him down and kill him all over again.

Keira’s reply was scribbled.

Can't talk much longer. Agree that Elliot's in danger here. We have that sorted – he'll go straight into hiding with a Hostile branch. Friends of mine arranging that. He can stay w/ them till we get his name cleared.

Madeleine's eyes widened. She wrote again:

Wait, are you saying there'll be Hostiles there too????? It was Hostiles who nearly killed ABEL, and they DID kill his brother. Basically you have executioners lined up waiting to take both Elliot and Abel down the moment they arrive!!

“Madeleine.” Abel spoke her name in a space between wheezes. She ignored him and sent the message. Keira's reply came quickly.

You need to stop worrying about this end of things. We've got that. You just need to get them to Berlin.

Abel was holding the torch high. “Madeleine,” he said again. She was vaguely aware that his shoulders were rising and falling.

She wrote in giant scribbles.

Keira, listen to me, Abel and Elliot are alive and well in my world and nobody's hunting them down with guns and dogs and choppers. Whereas, last time they were in YOUR world they were basically dead. With respect, you haven't “got” that end at all. You couldn't even transfer the whole royal family w/o everything going to hell??? So half the royals

are still trapped, alone in the World?? Princess Jupiter is right there in Berlin – why don't you get her thru first? And set up transfers for the Queen and the other prince at the same time?

Keira's reply arrived a few moments later.

Are you serious? Now you want to throw in a royal or two? You have no clue what has been happening here. It's total chaos. Princess Ko has been arrested. Hostiles on the rise. Elite taking power. Anyway, I can't have this conversation. Great that Abel and Elliot are alive and well but I don't think you or "your World" can take the credit for that. Cut out the commentary and let me know that this is going to happen. Once they're thru, I'll seal this crack and cut off all communications with u and the World – it's way too dangerous.

Madeleine clenched her fists so her nails cut into her palms. She turned the page in her notebook so fast it tore in half. She raised her pen to think — and felt a hand wrap around her own hand.

It was Abel.

She looked up at him and thought about how noisy asthma made the world. It was not just a regular wheeze, it was a cacophony of rattles and odd, tiny squeals.

"Madeleine," he said for the third time, and she realised that his tone had been the same for each. Loaded with certainty. "I haven't seen my wife or my home for over a year."

He paused, looking at her in the darkness.

"For most of that time," he continued, "I have not been myself. I've

believed I was somebody else. You remember we once talked about the concept of displacement?”

Madeleine nodded.

“To not remember your own self,” Abel said, “is the greatest displacement that there is.”

Madeleine stopped halfway to another nod.

“To be *dead*,” she argued, “is greater. I don’t trust this Keira. Who knows what she’s up to? And there’s no way she can guarantee that you’ll be safe. We need to think about this.”

Abel shook his inhaler again and took a deep drag.

“Cello is already starting to seem more theoretical than real. I could lose myself again, any time. As for Elliot, he says he knows who he is, but I suspect he just thinks we’re all insane. He’s playing along until he figures what to do.”

“No.” Madeleine shook her head and right away remembered Belle that morning: *He doesn’t believe that the Kingdom of Cello exists, let alone that that’s where he’s from.*

She bit her lip.

“It’s still better that he’s here,” she said, “and safe,” but she was thinking of that pleasant, neutral smile on Elliot’s face, and the despair that she’d glimpsed behind that smile.

Abel watched her, waiting, then he spoke her name one more time: “Madeleine,” he said, “we’re going home.”

She wrote.

Abel and Elliot will be in Berlin at midnight on Wednesday.

What else do we need to know?

So that was it.

Eight events and here they were at the station, saying goodbye.

She pulled the tissues away from her face so she could hold up her fingers and see exactly what the number eight looked like, in terms of fingers.

There was a rush of blood from her nose. She replaced the tissues.

Ah, she knew what eight looked like anyway.

Sure, maybe you could split some of those events into pieces and thereby increase the number, and there were probably a few minor incidents in between that she'd forgotten, *plus* there'd been the frenzied packing up of a flat and a business in the last two days — but *still*. Still.

She'd had Elliot for a total of eight events, and now he was leaving.

Since the day he arrived, they had not had a single conversation on their own.

The train approached. Abel touched her shoulder.

“Thank you,” he said, “for everything.”

“A pleasure.” Her voice was muffled by the tissues.

Other passengers were stepping around their group, pressing closer to the edge of the platform.

Elliot looked at her uncertainly.

“Are you okay?” he said. He had picked up a suitcase. The train doors were opening, passengers pouring out.

Madeleine nodded. “Yeah, this happens a lot. It'll stop. It's probably stopped now.”

She pulled the tissues away. Elliot frowned.

“It's still bleeding,” he said. “I think something serious is going on there.”

He looked sideways along the platform, thinking, but Abel had stepped onto the train.

“Let's go,” he called.

The automatic doors began to close.

Elliot swivelled, grabbed the door, and wrenched it open again. He

glanced back at Madeleine, raised a hand at the others, and jumped aboard. The doors slammed. She could see him through the glass, still with that vague frown.

A whistle blew, then another.

The shapes of them, Abel and Elliot, made their way down the aisle, looking at seats, not windows.

The train was moving.

“There go ICT and Geography!” sang Darshana.

“That is *not* their names!” shouted her daughters.

Maybe that was Elliot’s hand now, pressed to the window waving, or maybe not.

The train picked up speed, and fled, thrusting a storm of empty air behind it.

The blood rained down her mouth and chin, the empty air stormed, and the tracks, the platform, the station — everything — disappeared.

2.

Instead, there was a marketplace.

A boy, about twelve years old, was running. He slipped and slid on cobblestones. His eyes and nose were creased by an angry scowl, but his mouth was loose and childish with fear. Bigger boys were chasing him. They ran through the crowded marketplace: sudden sideways darts and awkward elbowing. People stood about watching the chase, or not watching it, their backs turned to reach for apples or figs.