

Later that evening, after her schoolwork was as complete as it was going to get, Rosie pulled on her pajamas, stuck her head outside the bedroom door, and yelled downstairs. “G’night Mom, g’night Dad.”

“Night Rosie,” Roger called up. “Sweet dreams. Mom’s outside walking the dogs. Wish me luck in the story.”

“Good luck Dad,” answered Rosie. “And good luck to Annie and Cedrik,” she murmured softly to herself.

Rosie entered her room, stepping carefully to avoid the clothes that lay scattered across the floor. Her mom had been nagging her the last few days to get the room in some kind of order and she knew she’d have to pick up at least some of the junk to avoid a minor war. Maybe over the weekend.

Moved by a sudden impulse, Rosie walked to her desk, reached into one of the drawers, and withdrew what looked like an extra-large brown walnut. It seemed to be carved from a piece of dark wood, one so dense that the individual grain lines could hardly be seen. What made it look so walnut-like were the knobs and ridges scattered randomly over its surface. Some of these actually resembled words, but not ones Rosie recognized.

Rosie had found it a couple of years ago, buried deep within a cardboard box she’d come across in a dark corner of their cellar. After satisfying herself that it was by far the most interesting object in the box, she’d brought it upstairs to her bedroom and had kept it there ever since.

She flopped down onto her bed and tried again, probably for the hundredth time, to make some sense of the strange markings that covered it. Turning it over, she noticed that something had changed since the last time she’d looked at it. There now seemed to be the faintest sign of a crack.

Tracing it with the edge of a fingernail, Rosie saw that the crack extended completely around the object, dividing it into two halves. *Maybe it just cracked with age*, she thought to herself. As she brought it up closer to her face to have a better look, her fingers unknowingly pressed

on the three most prominent knobs, one after the other. With a sharp snick, both halves of the piece swung apart. Startled, Rosie dropped it onto her bedsheets.

A slight haze hung in the air before her, barely more than the usual dust that filled her room. As she stared down at the case, for it was now clear that it was a case of some kind, she became aware of a new odor. Elusive and mysterious, like a memory from long ago that flits just out of reach. A touch of cinnamon perhaps, and a musky spice that made her nose twitch. As the haze faded, so did the smell. Now that the box was open, Rosie could see the internal hinge that allowed it to separate. She saw that it was made of wood, but of a different type from the outside case, reddish and waxy to the touch. To her disappointment, the box was completely empty.

Minutes ticked by as Rosie opened and closed the case. For some reason it wouldn't latch closed anymore, smoothly swiveling open each time she shut it.

Finally, shrugging her shoulders, she turned off the light and put her head down on her pillow, examining the opened box in the moonlight that now streamed through her window. After a few more minutes her head sagged further down into the pillow and she closed her eyes. As her consciousness slowly spiraled down into the pleasant darkness, it seemed to Rosie that she heard a soft voice calling to her. She tried to answer, but couldn't summon the energy. With a soft sigh, she slipped into a deep sleep.

Chapter 2

Friends in the Forest

“C’mon now Annie, up with ya! Ya canna sleep all day, much as ah know ya’d like tae try. Git up!”

Rosie, floating in that indistinct boundary between waking and sleep, heard the shrill, commanding, and completely unfamiliar voice, but chose to ignore it. It was so nice to stay asleep, so warm and comfortable. So peaceful.

Several long moments passed. “All right, ah warned ya!”

In the next moment, Rosie was shocked into complete and utter wakefulness as effectively as if dashed with cold water. How could she not have been? Her entire bed was tipping over and she was rapidly rolling out!