

## CHAPTER ONE

They paraded according to height.

It was also, coincidentally but appealingly, the order of their ages. William, in the lead, was tall and thin and fourteen; Kate, behind him, was thirteen. So it went down through Lauren and Emily and finally to Darren, the youngest at ten. In summer, with birthdays falling the way that they did, the five children represented a full accounting for every year over a five year span.

Further symmetry was achieved by beginning and ending the line with a boy. Kate, in particular, was pleased by this; Kate adored symmetry, although she wasn't particularly orderly. It was mere chance that they lined up so tidily: they didn't belong to a single family, but to a string of houses between a newly paved road and an old utility road of mud. Their common ground was the acres of spruce and birch trees spread between the barriers of the paved highway and the old mud road.

Kate and Darren broke out of the line, taking another fork in the trail. They met back up with the other three a few steps closer to Leader Green. "You've got a spider-web in your hair," Darren told Kate. She made a face, combing the sticky web out of her hair as she stepped over gnarled roots.

"See, if I go first that doesn't happen," Will said. Kate glared at his shoulders.

"I like the other trail better." She cut through branches and down a semi-trodden animal path between tall rounded moss humps, taking a shortcut that wasn't to reach Leader Green.

The other four took the more sedate, established route to Leader Green, winding around an unnecessary number of trees; the fort was

easily visible off to the left, but the path went several feet beyond it and twisted back around a line of spruce. If Kate liked symmetry, Will liked order, and following the path was the proper order of things.

Kate barely made it to Leader Green before the rest of them, crashing over another log and climbing up to the highest and therefore best seat--technically Will's--pink-cheeked and breathless. In the last year or so, a fear of heights had crept up on her, but Kate claimed that trees were different, and staunchly refused to talk about the time Will and Lauren's father had needed to rescue her from a ten-foot-high branch.

Leader Green spread out below her, a sprawling birch tree that grew sideways instead of up, with a few narrow spruces poking up through its branches to provide unexpected backrests.

"That's my seat," William muttered, and climbed into a lower seat, beneath Kate's dangling feet.

"I got here first." Kate clung to the steadying branch above her as Leader Green shook with the weight of children settling into their places. Darren and Emily bounced in tandem on a stretched-out dip of a branch they called the horse. Over their laughter, the beleaguered branch creaking ominously.

"Only 'cause you cheated."

"I didn't cheat. Going another way isn't cheating." Kate kicked her heel back. Will smacked it away with an open palm.

"It's still my seat. Okay, guys. Lauren, sit down. What's wrong?"

Lauren stood on the trunk, hanging onto the high swinging branch, leaned precariously to the side as she peered into a tangle of smaller branches, twigs, leaves and shadows. "There's a face over here," she said. "Come look."

Everyone slithered off their seats and came to look, William glancing avariciously at the branch Kate abandoned. "I don't see a face," Darren said stubbornly.

"You're too short," Lauren said. "Here, come up here." She jumped

down while Kate picked Darren up around the middle to try to lift him high enough to see. He grunted and kicked his feet.

"Put me down! I can climb up and see, jeez." He clambered up, taking Lauren's place and tilting out to the side to blink blue-eyed at the mess of branches.

"You see?" Lauren asked eagerly. "See? There's his eyes and his nose, see?" She jabbed her finger at the branches, defining the shapes.

"He's got kind of a long chin," Will said critically, tracing the shape in the air.

"There's a face! I can see it!" Darren pointed excitedly while Emily jumped up and down, trying to see more clearly.

"Let me up, let me look! I want to see better!" She climbed up Leader Green's trunk to get a better look, Darren crawling piggy-backed onto Kate to get out of her way. Kate staggered a step or two, getting her balance with Darren's weight, then stood on her toes, looking into the leaves.

"Wow, I can really see him. Look at his cheeks, the sunlight makes him look almost real, doesn't he? What's his name?" Voices and questions tumbled over one another, eager and bright.

"Well, he must be Leader Green." Kate hitched Darren higher up, squinting up at the shifting leaves. "He's Leader Green's spirit."

"The Green Man," Will said in a voice of superior knowledge, and folded his arms smugly as the other children turned to look at him curiously.

A branch cracked, a hard sharp sound. The five all whipped around again to face the Green Man, who looked down at them, tall and brown and strong, his palms pressed together in front of his chest as if they were the source of the cracking sound. Wild brown hair, tangled with branches and leaves, spilled down his back and over his shoulders and tattered clothes.

Lauren shrieked, a pure, high piercing sound that went on and on. Wind roared up, yanking young leaves off their branches and whirling

them around in funnels. The Green Man threw his head back and laughed, clapping his hands together again with a louder crack of breaking branches. He bowed, a sweeping, grandiose gesture that acknowledged all five of the children individually, took a step back--

--and vanished.

## CHAPTER TWO

The wind died and Lauren stopped screaming, or Lauren stopped screaming and the wind died; the two events seemed related. Then Lauren bit William's hand, which he'd lodged firmly over her mouth, and he yelled.

"Ow! What'd you do that for?" Will jerked his hand away, shaking it violently.

"You put it in my mouth!"

"You wouldn't shut up!"

"You didn't ask me to!"

Darren hung onto Kate's neck with a chokehold. "What was that?" he whispered.

"The sky's gone all cloudy," Emily reported, staring up at it through the trees. "It was really nice just a second ago."

Lauren and William stopped yelling long enough to look up at the stone-grey sky. "I thought the Green Man was English, or something," Kate blurted before they could get started again. She looked up at the sky, too, tilting over as Darren's weight pulled her off balance.

"Let go, let go--oof!" Darren let go too late, Kate falling on top of him. Both yowled with pain, poked sharply with elbows and ribs and smacking heads.

"Ow, you weigh a ton!" Darren shouted. Kate rolled off him, rubbing her ribs.

"And your knees are all bony and pointy. Are you okay?"

Darren scowled ferociously and inspected himself as he climbed to his feet. "Yeah."

"I didn't mean to fall on top of you. You didn't let go," Kate

said, half contrite and half defensive.

"Well, I didn't know you were gonna fall over! You got a bug in your hair." Darren flicked an aphid out of Kate's hair, restoring peace. "Who was that guy?" he repeated, scowling anew at the branches that Emily was nervously prodded.

"He's gone now, whoever he was. They're just branches. Was he really real?" Emily asked skeptically.

"He was real," everybody else chorused. Emily jumped back, wide-eyed. "Okay, okay. But what's a green man?"

"He's a mythological," Kate said, and Will said, "He's supposed to represent," and they scowled at each other until Will flung up his hands and let Kate continue.

"He's a mythological figure," Kate said triumphantly, "who has to die in the wintertime in order for spring to come."

"He supposed to be a caretaker," Will finished. "He represents the circle of life and death."

Emily folded her arms suspiciously. "How do you guys know that?"

"I read about him in a book," Kate said, and Emily looked mollified.

"Okay," Darren said, "but what's he doing in Leader Green?"

Will and Kate exchanged glances and shrugged imperceptibly at each other. "Maybe we imagined it," Will said. Emily made an exasperated sound.

"We didn't imagine it when I said it, we don't get to imagine it just because you're older."

Will held up his hands, placating. "All right, sorry."

"Where d'you think he went?" Kate wondered. She ducked under one of Leader Green's branches, pushing leaves out of the way. "I mean, do you think he's still around somewhere?" She looked back over her shoulder with a hopeful grin, then left the fort.

"Oh great," Emily said. "Let's go look for the scary green guy."

"Green Man," Will corrected, and followed Kate. The other children spilled after them, taking individual paths through the

trees. Darren hopped from one moss hump to another, swinging his arms for momentum, until the others were far enough ahead that he had to run to catch up. Lauren, half visible, stopped in a clearing of sunlight and looked around.

"Hey, Darren? Did this used to be here?"

Darren skidded into the little clearing, looking up. "The sun came out again. Did what used to be here?"

"These trees. Look at them." Lauren turned in a circle, pointing. Darren turned with her, then looked back the other way again.

"Weird. Hey, KATE! Will! Em! C'mere and look at this!"

"Whaaaaaat?" Kate's voice echoed back from deeper into the forest, but she and Emily returned, Will coming up from a hollow a few yards away.

Streams of sunlight broke and reformed with the movement of leaves, dappling the five as they turned in the clearing. It was round, eight or ten feet across, with pale-barked birch trees spaced around it at regular intervals. Two of the trees stood back from the rest, slightly disrupting the circle's shape.

"Nope," Emily said. "This wasn't here. It's almost perfect."

"There are fourteen trees," Kate said. "I wonder if that means anything."

"It means there are fourteen trees," Will said. Kate kicked at him.

"Where'd it come from?" Lauren turned around again, squinting into the wavering sun. "I mean, it wasn't here last year. It wasn't. Was it?"

"We would've noticed," Kate said. "It's new." She turned around, too, counting the trees again. "But the trees aren't new. I mean, they're not saplings." She wrapped her fingers around one of the trunks, which was a little larger than both hands could span.

"I guess they came with the Green Man," Darren said. Kate blinked at him.

"How?"

"Wuhl, I donno," Darren said. He folded his arms across his chest. "But they weren't here before and neither was he."

"They had to have been here," Will said, without sounding the least convinced. "We just missed them."

"Wil-liam," Kate said impatiently. "Come on. We've lived in these woods for six years."

"Sometimes we live in the house!" Darren protested, grinning. Kate made a face at him and looked back at Will.

"D'you really think we'd miss this? I mean, you can still almost see Leader Green from here. And this is round. I mean, it's like somebody planted them here, but they couldn't have. Look at all the moss, it's just grown up here like it's always been." Kate scuffed at a moss hump with a shoe. "It's always been here."

"Except it hasn't," Lauren said with great finality.

"Right." Kate nodded.

"You guys are nuts," Will said.

"Except you saw the Green Man too," Kate pointed out. Will looked uncomfortable and stomped out of the circle. Kate groaned.

"Will. Will! Come back!" She chased after him. Lauren spun around in a circle in the middle of the trees. Emily followed Kate, stopping to pull up a handful of dogwood flowers whose thin stems she braided together as she walked.

No one noticed when Darren walked between the two offset birches and disappeared.

### CHAPTER THREE

A squirrel went off in Darren's ear, chittering madly. He jumped and chattered back, sending it scampering up its tree. "You started it," he said, and turned to follow Kate and Will deeper into the woods.

Kate and Will weren't there. Neither, for that matter, were the woods. Or rather: there were woods. They were very clearly not his woods. The trees were rougher, darker, and much thicker. Darren, without basis, thought they might be oaks. The earth under his feet wasn't mossy, either, at least not the moss humps that grew between the birch and spruce in his woods. Worse, the leaves weren't new and green with early summer, but golden and red and orange, more impulsive colors than he was accustomed to seeing, even in autumn. "Kate? Will? Are you guys there? Hello?"

Another angry squirrel answered with a rapid trill, and a robin whistled in reply. Neither Kate nor Will made an appearance. Darren turned around, looking over the few steps he'd taken.

Two birch trees, utterly out of place in the rest of the forest, stood behind him, slightly less than an arms'-width apart. Darren stared at them warily. "Hello?"

An agitated bird exploded out of a tree, making him jump again. He watched it fly away, then gnawed his lower lip and eyed the two birch trees. "I won't go very far," he promised them, and struck off, counting his steps.

At seventeen, he realized he was counting one step for each syllable, and dug into his pockets, looking for his pocketknife to mark the trees with. He found two squares of purple bubble gum, a Kleenex, almost a dollar in change, a broken Lego, a folded-up

trading card, two more dollars wadded into a ball, and his dog's collar, which he hadn't remembered putting in his pocket. Darren frowned at the trees and at his handful of loot, then grinned.

A moment later a small purple dot decorated the black bark of the nearest tree, and Darren went on, blowing bubbles.

One entire piece of gum later, a sharp hill swooped down in front of him, a fallen oak angling all the way from the top of the hill to the bottom. The hill was otherwise bare of trees, rolling into several feet of clear forest floor at the bottom of the hill. Darren, grinning, flung himself down the hill, thumping and oofing as he rolled.

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"This was not here." Kate stood at the top of a hill, her hands on her hips. The hill spilled down some twenty feet, rolling to the trees below at a dramatic angle. A spruce tree, broken off eight or nine feet up, fell down the hill, the only tree on it. The foot of the hill gradually merged into forest, well below them.

"There was a hill here," Emily said, not really arguing. "It wasn't this big."

"The tree wasn't there either," Lauren put in.

"The tree could've fallen during the winter," Will said stubbornly, and they all nodded at him.

"But the hill," Kate said. Will rubbed his nose.

"There was a hill here," he agreed. "Maybe...we're just remembering it being smaller."

"Wouldn't we remember it bigger?" Lauren asked. "Since we were smaller last year? It's like the water fountains at school," she added brightly. "I had to go into the elementary school the other day and the water fountains are really short now." Lauren had just finished sixth grade at the middle school, and was very involved in being grown-up.

"Emily?" Kate asked, looking around. "Where's Darren?"

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Darren climbed to his feet at the bottom of the hill and jumped up onto the fallen oak, running up the trunk. He turned and yelped, pinwheeling his arms for un-needed balance, surprised at how high he was. Kate would be scared out of her mind. The air was crisp and clean and he puffed out a breath, seeing if it was visible in the faint chill. It wasn't, and he took a deeper breath, convinced the air further inside him would be warmer as he exhaled.

A barely visible wash of steam greeted him. He grinned at it pleased, and was inhaling for another try when he heard bells.

He clambered back to his feet, squinting towards the sound. Lauren and Will's mother collected tiny delicate bells, metal and porcelain, that rang with pure sweet tones; that was what this sounded like. They gave him goosebumps and made the hairs on his neck stand up. Darren rubbed his neck, craning it as he looked around.

The sun and leaves made dapples again, like they'd done in the circle of trees in his woods. Darren squinted against the light, trying to distinguish shadows from movement. Below him, where the trees began again, a tall shadow of a man moved, and a semi-familiar clomph against the moss sounding beneath the bells.

Another shadow shifted the light and became person-shaped, just for a moment. Darren slowly sat back down on the broken trunk, eyes widening as more and more shadows shimmered green and gold and white, changing the light.

A host of riders separated itself from the trees and came along the foot of the hill.

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"Do you hear bells?" Emily asked.

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Darren held his breath, head hunched down and shoulders high. The riders at the bottom of the hill weren't human. They were all tall, even without their mounts--some of them were on foot, walking at the horses' bridles or hand in hand with one another. They were so pale they looked golden, glowing a little where the sun touched their skin. Every single one of them wore long hair, almost all of them blond or red-haired, but not a strong red color. Strawberry blond, Darren thought; Will's hair got that color sometimes, even though he was mostly a blond. A few of them had white hair, or maybe it was silver.

Many of them wore braids in their hair, and the horses' manes and tails were braided, too, like they were going to be in a parade. Bright-colored ribbons wove in and out of hair and manes alike, although nearly all of the people wore pale-colored clothing, creams and whites and golds and greys, only highlighted with color. The chime of the bells came from the horses' gear, delicate-looking leather worked with symbols Darren couldn't quite make out, the bells interwoven with the design.

A man at the front of the ride carried a tall pole with a fluttering banner on it. Something was woven onto the banner, something with wings, but the wind didn't straighten the fabric enough for Darren to see it clearly. A woman rode behind him, flanked by a pair of young-looking men, not that any of them looked old. She, though, wore crimson, and her hair was gold. Really gold, like sunset reflected in a lake, a warm rippling color that Darren wanted to touch. Her hair was swept back, a crown of braids and flowers wrapped around her head.

From his hiding spot, Darren stared hard at her ears, hoping they were pointed.

Almost as quickly as they'd come, the host of riders faded out

again, leaving only the sound of bells behind.

Darren nearly fell off the tree in his haste to scramble down and run for the birch gateway.